

RICE UNIVERSITY

**Abraham Lincoln's Northwestern Approach to the Secession
Crisis**

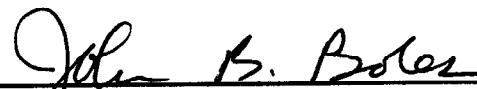
by

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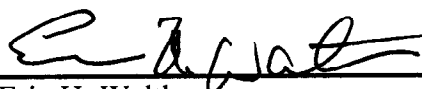
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ABSTRACT

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by

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While the migration of Abraham Lincoln's family to the Northwest has often been documented as a significant event of his youth, historians have neglected the powerful repercussions this family decision had on Lincoln's assessment of the South and the secession crisis in 1860 and 1861. Lincoln's years living and working in the Northwest from 1831 to 1861 exposed him to the anti-slave system ethos of that region's southern-born migrants. Sensitive to the restraints they believed the social system of slavery placed upon their own liberties, these former southerners simultaneously despised the slave system, hated African Americans, and sympathized with white slaveholders and nonslaveholders who remained in the South. After building his initial sense of southern society from these migrants, Lincoln spent his years as a U.S. congressman learning the significance of the Northwest Ordinance in creating the free society in which they had thrived. Emphasizing Thomas Jefferson's role in conceiving the Northwest Ordinance and utilizing statistical evidence to prove the superiority of free soil over slave, Lincoln's colleagues further expanded Lincoln's conception of the South.

All these influences combined to produce Lincoln's uniquely northwestern approach to slavery, the South, and the secession crisis. Believing that the self-interest of white nonslaveholding southerners naturally propelled them away from the South and

toward free society, Lincoln perceived the slave South as a vastly unequal society controlled by a minority of aristocratic slaveholders who cajoled or chided their nonslaveholding neighbors into accepting a vision of the South's proslavery, expansionist future. As president-elect, Lincoln therefore overestimated the Unionist sentiment of southerners before and during the secession crisis. He remained convinced that the majority of white nonslaveholders would not support a secessionist movement that he believed countered their own self-interest. With time, and through careful communications with the South, he remained convinced that he could settle secessionist passions and bring southerners to trust him and the Republican Party. This northwestern perception of the South therefore explains, in part, Lincoln's silence and his refusal to compromise during the secession crisis.

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in this study helped me to constantly see the larger picture and remained focused on the most important elements. Dr. John B. Boles's constant guidance was simply incredible, and allowed me not only to complete this dissertation, but to develop into a well-rounded and confident historian. It would be difficult to find another historian whose generosity and dedication to his students rivals his own.

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Introduction

“I see now, though I hadn’t considered the matter before, that there are two different ways of writing history: one is to persuade men to virtue and the other is to compel men to truth. The first is Livy’s way and the other is yours: and perhaps they are not irreconcilable.”

Claudius to Pollio, *I, Claudius*, by Robert Graves

As the secession crisis loomed over the Union in the winter of 1860–1861, President-elect Lincoln remained in Springfield, Illinois, and pondered whether a majority of southerners supported separation. Turning to political acquaintance Alexander Stephens, among others, he asked: “Do the people of the South really entertain fears that a Republican administration would, *directly, or indirectly*, interfere with their slaves, or with them, about their slaves? If they do, I wish to assure you, as once a friend, and still, I hope, not an enemy, that there is no cause for such fears.” Ultimately choosing to evade southern provocations with a “masterly silence” from his home in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln enjoined Republicans to compromise on any issue but the extension of slavery. As historian William Cooper recently noted, the perception of the South that led Lincoln to pursue this policy remains “a key question...largely unanswered.” Cooper offers one reason for “Lincoln’s unbending posture” on the slavery extension issue: “his ignorance of the South.” Historians have largely agreed with Cooper, portraying the president-elect as a sympathetic observer of the South who believed most nonslaveholding southerners remained ardent Unionists. Through time and patient policy, he could dissuade them from the extremism of a slaveholding planter class whose political and economic interests opposed their own.¹

¹ Cooper further contends that throughout the secession crisis the Republican Party had the choice of compromising with the South on the issue of slavery extension. Since most southerners appeared to accept the terms offered in the Crittenden Compromise, Lincoln likely could have reunited the seceding states

Although these studies have explored the immediate context of the crisis, noting the information Lincoln received from or about the South in 1860 and 1861 and analyzing the extent to which he was willing to make to the region, historians have only briefly noted Lincoln's perception of southerners before moving on to his pre-presidential policy and the South's response. Despite the looming tower of Lincoln literature that shapes any discussion of this crucial period of our nation's history, the roots of Lincoln's conception of the South have been granted very limited attention. Nearly all these interpretations, which agree that Lincoln somehow miscalculated the South's reaction with flawed expectations, rest their interpretations on statements Lincoln made in letters and speeches in 1860. Scholars highlight, for example, a letter the Republican nominee wrote on August 15 to Virginia supporter John M. Botts, asserting that "[t]he people of the South have too much of good sense, and good temper, to attempt the ruin of the government....At least, so I hope and believe." Just days before his election to the presidency, Lincoln similarly referred to "the good men of the South—and I regard the majority of them as such," as overwhelmingly Unionist but overshadowed by those "who are eager for something new upon which to base new misrepresentations."²

Historians have long relied on such comments as proof that Lincoln misunderstood the strength of the South's commitment to slavery and secession. Russell McClintock remarks on Lincoln's "early blindness to the true danger of Southern disunionism." Shearer Davis Bowman notes that he "seemed to believe that with time and calm, the majority of citizens in the slave states would feel a resurgence of their deep-

under the banner of the Union. William J. Cooper, "The Critical Signpost on the Journey Toward Secession," *Journal of Southern History*, 77 (February 2011): 13, 16.

² Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1935–1955), VI: 50; IV: 134–35, (hereafter abbreviated *CW*).

seated Unionist sympathies, temporarily repressed by the fear-mongering of fire-eating hotpurs. In this scenario, southern Unionism, like an incoming tide, would drown most of the ugly disunionism that had appeared when the waters receded.” David Donald similarly emphasizes Lincoln’s “deeply held conviction that Unionists were in a large majority throughout the South and that, given time for tempers to cool, they would be able to defeat the secessionist conspirators.” Time, historian Robert Johannsen argues, was crucial to the president-elect. He “had claimed on a number of occasions that his election would end the agitation over slavery,” and eventually, when “Southerners recognized that he was right, he believed they would cease their hostility toward the North.”³

If time did not bring this calm, military pressure would. “As the Union army occupied more areas,” relates William Harris, “an increasing number of Southerners, he believed, would take the oath of allegiance and participate in their state and local governments.” While nearly all of these historians depict a Lincoln whose faith in southern Unionism remained unbroken through his inauguration, they do offer different timing for the shattering of this faith. Craig Symonds depicts the return of three scouts the president sent to South Carolina in March 1861 as an unsettling event. After learning from reports that South Carolina stood unanimously for secession, however, Lincoln’s faith appeared shaken but not yet broken. David Potter argues this sentiment remained intact at least as late as Lincoln’s appeal to Congress on July 4, 1861, when he “still insisted that there was much loyalty to the United States within the Confederacy.”

³ Russell McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 10; Shearer Davis Bowman, *At the Precipice: Americans North and South during the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 272; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 260; Robert W. Johannsen, *Lincoln and the South in 1860* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1989), 3.

Richard H. Abbott's study of *The Republican Party and the South* concurs, asserting that Lincoln's attempts to build Union support in the South after war had begun were based "on the presumed existence of a mass of Southerners who were basically pro-Union but who had been misled by secessionist leaders into supporting the Confederacy."⁴

As many of these same historians have long noted, however, Lincoln's faith in southern Unionism was not unique, and it was not entirely misplaced. Other Americans with ties to the border states and Upper South also underestimated secession, and they supported Lincoln's sense that the crisis would pass with time.⁵ An entry from Edward Bates's diary for November 22, 1860, exemplifies the widespread Republican assumption that secessionist sentiment was indeed more a façade than a mass movement by the southern people: "Still I think that (except with a few demented fanatics) it is all brag and bluster, hoping thus to make a better compromise with the timid patriotism of their opponents." Although war might still result from this extremism, "letters and telegrams from *the South*, bear plain evidence of exagiration, and make a false shewing of the unanimity of the people, in support of the traitorous design. A very little time will show" their disapproval of such extreme sectionalism. Bates's faith in southern Unionism mirrored the sentiments of many southerners, and Republicans, whom Lincoln had contact with in 1860 and 1861.⁶ Popular sovereignty Democrat John A. Logan, who won

⁴ William H. Harris, *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 8–9; Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and his admirals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12–14; David Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), 375; Richard H. Abbott, *The Republican Party and the South, 1855–1877: The First Southern Strategy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 20.

⁵ In particular, Lincoln largely relied on the opinions of southern unionists and their informants, such as Winfield Scott, George D. Prentice, and John Minor Botts, *CW*, IV: 95, 134–35, 137.

⁶ Edward Bates in Brooks D. Simpson, Stephen W. Sears and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, eds., *The Civil War: The First Year* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2011), 48. Historians continue to debate the extent of unionism in the South. David Potter believed "a majority in the South did not want disunion and that a majority in the North did not want to press the question of slavery in the territories." Potter, *Lincoln and his*

election to U.S. Congress in 1859 and whose Democratic sympathies reflected the heavily southern district he represented in Illinois, made the identical prediction that with time, “calm southerners would realize Lincoln was ‘harmless,’” and would refuse to heed the call of fire-eating secessionists to join a slaveholding Confederacy.⁷

Some scholars add greater context to Lincoln’s approach to the secession crisis in order to provide a more comprehensive assessment of his course. Eric Foner and William Baringer place Lincoln within the context of his informers, noting that he “was not a detached observer,” and his particular “sources of information”—often Upper South and border state Unionists—led him to believe the South was not in earnest.” In *The Fiery Trial* Foner also acknowledges the widespread Republican conviction, shared by Lincoln, that “the mass of white southerners did not share the interests of the Slave Power,” as well as the optimistic 1860 election returns that seemed to calm northern fears of southern disunion. “John Bell’s victories in Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee and near-victories in Maryland and North Carolina, and Douglas’s capture of Missouri, strengthened Republicans’ conviction that the Upper South, at least, was strongly pro-Union.” Michael Burlingame and David Potter likewise point out that “[t]ogether, Bell and Douglas, who opposed secession, won 110,000 more Southern votes than

Party, xlii. As Shearer Davis Bowman further points out, “Confederate leaders found much less support than they had hoped for in the big cities of the border slave states—Baltimore, Louisville, and St. Louis.” Bowman, *At the Precipice*, 285. Indeed, Lincoln’s faith in the South’s Unionism seems to hold true for the border states. William E. Gienapp, “Abraham Lincoln and the Border States,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 13, no. 1 (1992): 15; William C. Harris, *Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 2, 11. Many recent studies have highlighted the prevalence of southern Unionism and its effects before and during the war. See Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861–1865* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 234; Jon L. Wakelyn, *Confederates against the Confederacy: Essays on Leadership and Loyalty* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 14, 33–34; William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), xiii.

⁷ John A. Logan, “Freshman in Congress, 1859–1861,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56 (Spring 1963): 52–53.

Breckinridge,” who was generally perceived as the pro-secession candidate.⁸ Robert Johannsen, meanwhile, ascribes Lincoln's faith in a southern Unionist majority to his vantage point from Springfield in 1860 and 1861, remarking that the president-elect remained “insulated from the crisis that threatened the Union. Indeed, the crisis appeared much less serious on the prairies of central Illinois than it did in the legislative halls and executive office of the national capital.” Even longtime foe Stephen Douglas wondered at Lincoln’s apparent oblivion to the seriousness of southern secessionism, remarking that he seemed defined more by the local events in Springfield than by his recent propulsion to national stature. As William Seward and other moderate Republicans scrambled to effect some compromise during the 1860–61 secession winter, Lincoln forbade any moderation on the slavery-extension issue⁹

This reliance on primary source material from the late 1850s through the secession crisis, however contextualized, leads only to superficial explanations for *why* Lincoln misunderstood the South in 1860. No studies of Lincoln and the secession crisis comprehensively address Lincoln’s conception of southerners from his youth and political rise in the northwestern state of Illinois.¹⁰ William Cooper’s short address notes

⁸ William E. Baringer, *A House Dividing: Lincoln as President Elect* (Springfield: The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1945), 71; Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2010), 150–51. David Zarefsky agrees with Foner that Lincoln’s belief in the Slave Power led him to underappreciate the momentum of secession. The rattling of fire-eaters and frequent invocation of disunion “had become so common in the midcentury rhetorical culture that it was regarded as ‘rhetorical bluster to coerce the North into accepting Southern demands.’ It was a campaign device” utilized by southern slaveholders, “and if ignored it would go away.” Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 216; Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), I: 692; David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York and other cities: Harper and Row, 1976), 442.

⁹ Johannsen, *Lincoln and the South in 1860*, 16, 22.

¹⁰ Some studies addressing Lincoln’s view of southern secession have stated the significance of Lincoln’s northwestern experiences without exploring them in detail. Emory Thomas, *The Dogs of War: 1861* (New York and other cities: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18, claims Lincoln “believed that common white folk in the South were very much like the people with whom he had grown up in Indiana and Illinois,” and he therefore “did not take seriously support for secession in the South.” Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln:*

that, beside his two flatboat trips to New Orleans as an adolescent, “he never traveled in the South beyond Kentucky. Aside from a few Kentuckians, he really did not know any southerners, certainly not any southern politicians....[f]undamentally, he had no friends who could educate him about the South and southern politics.” He therefore developed “no understanding of either the widespread ownership of slaves among whites or how deeply embedded slavery had become in southern society.”¹¹ Many studies have highlighted particular southern interactions, relationships, and events that shaped Lincoln’s development, without addressing them holistically. Historians have often recounted “the interrelationship between Lincoln and Kentucky throughout his life.” Lowell Harrison contends it was Lincoln’s understanding of Kentucky and Kentuckians...[that]...kept the state of his birth in the Union” and notes the tendency of Kentuckians to migrate across the Ohio River. Stephen Berry explicates the inner Civil War that occurred within Mary Todd’s Kentucky family, dividing brothers and sisters on either side of the Union-Confederate line and offering Lincoln a microcosm of the secession crisis. A multitude of studies examine Lincoln’s friendship or personal acquaintance with Kentuckians like Joshua F. Speed, John Todd Stuart, Stephen T. Logan, William Herndon, Joseph Holt, Orlando Bell Ficklin, and Usher Linder.¹² The two flatboat trips Lincoln took to New Orleans, meanwhile, have received attention in

Redeemer President (Grand Rapids, Mi.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 254, 230, similarly asserts the significance of these northwesterners to Lincoln’s decision-making in 1860.

¹¹ Cooper, “The Critical Signpost,” 14.

¹² Lowell H. Harrison, *Lincoln of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), viii; William H. Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1955), vii; Stephen Berry, *House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, A Family Divided by War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007); Elizabeth D. Leonard, *Lincoln’s Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); “Orlando Bell Ficklin and Usher Ferguson Linder,” in Charles H. Coleman, *Abraham Lincoln and Coles County, Illinois* (New Brunswick, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1955); David Herbert Donald, “*We Are Lincoln Men*”: *Abraham Lincoln and His Friends* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

“nearly every book written about Lincoln, from children’s readers to scholarly tomes,” as a particularly significant incident in the development of Lincoln’s personal antislavery views.¹³ Additional studies highlight Lincoln’s congressional term in Washington, D.C. as a formative period, occasionally mentioning his relationship with southerners during those years.¹⁴

Adopting Cooper’s prescient observation that an examination of Lincoln’s lifelong associations with the South—not just his interactions during the short period of the crisis—is absolutely necessary to any assessment of his policy decisions in 1860–61, this dissertation studies Lincoln’s perception of southerners from his arrival in Illinois in 1831 to his presidential inauguration in March 1861. Besides extending the temporal focus, however, this dissertation also deviates from previous scholarship in its emphasis on Lincoln’s perspective as a southern-born migrant to the Northwest. It is a well-known fact that Lincoln twice piloted a flatboat to New Orleans, became a part of Mary Todd’s slaveholding Kentucky family, and interacted with southern politicians during his term in Congress. To encounter southern-born Americans, however, he did not even need to travel beyond the boundaries of Illinois. Since its earliest days as a section of the Northwest Territory, Illinois was settled by men, women, and children who migrated from the slaveholding South. These migrants often moved northward across the Ohio River to extricate themselves from the strictures of a slaveholding society they believed hindered the progress of nonslaveholders. As the offspring of such migrants, Lincoln

¹³ Richard Campanella’s recent monograph is the only work that attempts to reconstruct the context surrounding Lincoln on these trips, detailing the extent and types of interactions with slavery he most likely had. Campanella, *Lincoln in New Orleans: The 1828–1831 Flatboat Voyages and Their Place in History* (Lafayette, La.: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2010), 1; Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York and other cities: Harper and Row, 1977), 60, quoted in James L. Huston, “The Experiential Basis of the Northern Antislavery Impulse,” *Journal of Southern History* 56 (November 1990), 624.

¹⁴ Donald W. Riddle, *Congressman Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957), 17, 73.

daily interacted with anti-slave system southern-born migrants who hated slavery, abolitionism, and blacks. Lincoln's experiences in the Northwest from 1831 to 1860 therefore endowed him with an acute sense of the importance of the Northwest Ordinance, and a particular understanding of the South. These ideological products of Lincoln's experience matured after his term in U.S. Congress, when he was exposed to southerners and to arguments about the Northwest Ordinance, and spurred him back into political action after the repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854.¹⁵

The sixteenth president's associations with his native state are often subsumed beneath a larger debate over whether Lincoln was a southerner or a westerner. Despite numerous attempts to settle the question, it continues to overshadow all historiography on Lincoln and the South, reflecting the difficulty of understanding Lincoln in the greater context of the shifting boundaries of North, South, and West from 1787 to 1860. James

¹⁵ Since William C. Binkley's call for studies on southern migration to the antebellum West, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the impact of this major process on U.S. politics, ideology, society and culture. Binkley, "The South and the West," *Journal of Southern History* 17 (February 1951). Peter D. McClelland and Richard J. Zeckhauser argue in *Demographic Dimensions of the New Republic: American Interregional Migration, Vital Statistics and Manumissions, 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60, that during "the 1840–60 period, the New South became a region of major exodus," while the Northwest remained a major region of southern influx. "In short, to the common view of an East-West flow must now be added the uncommon view of a *major South-North flow throughout the entire 60-year period*," from 1800 to 1860. Histories of Illinois, like James E. Davis's *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 189, regularly highlight the influence of southern migration on the state. Paul M. Angle shifts the migration focus specifically to Lincoln, briefly questioning how much impact southern-born migrants had on his approach to the South. Paul M. Angle, "*Here I have Lived*": *A History of Lincoln's Springfield, 1821–1865*," (Springfield, Ill.: The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1935), xiv. Other studies of Illinois and Lincoln mention southern migration as significant factor in the state's or Lincoln's development: Paul E. Stroble, *High on the Okaw's Western Bank: Vandalia, Illinois, 1819–39* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Stephen B. Oates, "'My Dissatisfied Fellow Countrymen': Abraham Lincoln and the Slaveholding South" in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Essays on Southern History: Written in honor of Barnes L. Lathrop* (Austin: University of Texas, 1980), 95–116; Benjamin P. Thomas, *Lincoln's New Salem* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988); Kenneth J. Winkle, "The Voters of Lincoln's Springfield," *Journal of Social History* 25 (Spring 1992); Andrew R. L. Cayton, "The Peopling of the Old Northwest," in Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 26. Other works examine the hatred of slavery and/or African Americans espoused by southern migrants to the Northwest: James Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois: The Bottomland Republic* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Don Harrison Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825–70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 51; William V. Pooley, "The Settlement of Illinois from 1830 to 1850" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1905).

G. Randall counted Lincoln's interactions with Mary Todd's slaveholding family, the broader border South, and southerners in the Northwest as definitive evidence that he was born, raised, and remained a southerner. Nicole Etcheson, Orville Vernon Burton, and John J. Coelho argue that parts of the Northwest—particularly southern Illinois and southern Indiana—retained a southern cultural identity that continued to steer its inhabitants. Lincoln's life in Illinois therefore revolved around southern ideals, such as personal and family honor, and “manliness,” brought by southern-born migrants to the West.¹⁶ Rather than perceiving these migrants to the Northwest as ideologically and/or culturally distinct from other southerners by 1860, these scholars interpret the process of migration as an extension of the cultural South.¹⁷

Etcheson and Coelho specifically focus on the honor culture of the South, arguing that “Upland Southern society...[was] transmitted into the southern reaches of Illinois territory by poor, white settlers from Maryland, piedmont Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee,” and migrant southerners “actively maintained this way of life even decades after their relocation to the Northwest.” Only Orville Vernon Burton, however, connects his interpretation of Lincoln as a southerner to the secession crisis in 1860. He borrows David's Moltke-Hansen's definition of southerners as “people born or living in the Confederate states, the border states, and people of southern descent living in areas adjacent to the borders, such as the southern portions of Ohio, Indiana, and

¹⁶ John J. Coelho, “The Politics of Honor: Character, Slavery, and the Political Development of Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1854,” (Master's Thesis, Providence College, 2006); Catherine Clinton, “Abraham Lincoln: The Family that Made him, the Family he Made” in Eric Foner, ed., *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2008), 249–66; Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 104–133.

¹⁷ In his study of Upland Southerners in Indiana, Gregory A. Peek similarly finds that state defined by its direct connection with the South. However, he argues that despite the extension of the South into Indiana, “sectional extremism in the Deep South...alienated Upland Southerners” who had migrated to the state, prompting some to even vote Republican. Peek, “Upland Southerners, Indiana Political Culture, and the Coming of the Civil War, 1816–1861” (PhD diss., University of Houston, 2010), 2.

Illinois,” to assert that Lincoln did not severely misjudge the extent of southern Unionism. In Burton’s estimation, “Lincoln lived as a southern man, a southern husband, a southern father,” and “40 percent or more of all white southerners fought for the Union.”¹⁸

Burton’s work makes a prescient, though brief, connection between migration to the Northwest and Lincoln’s view of southerners in 1860, arguing, “Lincoln’s southern roots were also reflected in his belief that, despite the fiery rhetoric of their leaders, the majority of southern yeomen would not be persuaded. In the end, after all, the master class had little to offer the South’s common people....He knew that many southern whites opposed slavery even as they also opposed abolitionism.” Though I believe this statement accurately captures Lincoln’s sentiments, Burton’s characterization of southern-born Illinoisans as virtual southerners in 1860 simply does not accord with the differences in voting patterns, ideology, and culture that had separated the Northwest from the South by 1860. Though the two remained intimately connected through cultural traditions, family connections, and Mississippi River trade, an ideological evolution, on both sides, had exacerbated already existing differences between northwestern migrants and their family and friends who remained within the slaveholding South. Heeding historian David Blight’s rearticulation of the warning that historians “not make too much of Lincoln’s personal ties to Kentucky or even of the influence of his ‘Southernness,’” this dissertation

¹⁸ Coelho, “The Politics of Honor,” 19; and Nicole Etcheson, “Manliness and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1790–1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Spring 1995), 62; Burton, *Age of Lincoln*, 129.

accepts that “the Illinois of his adulthood was far different from the Kentucky of his youth.”¹⁹

Richard Current supports this interpretation, explaining that “[i]n peopling the lower counties of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, the large numbers of Virginians, Carolinians, and Kentuckians did not create an extension of the South. They did not, of course, take slaves with them; indeed, many of them made the move in order to get away from slavery.” Nicole Etcheson’s study of the *Emerging Midwest*, though stressing the continuing significance of northern and southern cultural identity in the West, also points out that by 1860, southern-born Illinoisans “were forced to articulate the simple truth that they were no longer Southerners.” As one of these Illinoisans, Lincoln “recognized his roots as an Upland Southerner, believed he understood southerners better than Douglas, and attempted to employ that background to his political benefit” during the Lincoln-Douglas debates and beyond. Though her reference to Lincoln within this context is brief, Etcheson later makes the same crucial connection asserted in this dissertation: that southern-born Illinoisans’ sympathy for the South “was offset” by their “distrust for the planter aristocracy. The idea of a ‘slave power conspiracy’ had meaning for Upland

¹⁹ Burton, *Age of Lincoln*, 128; David W. Blight, “Hating and Loving the ‘Real’ Abe Lincolns: Lincoln and the American South” in Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton, eds., *The Global Lincoln* (New York and other cities: Oxford University Press, 2011), 273. Robert Johannsen reiterated David Blight’s warning. Although it seems Lincoln “should have been exceptionally well-informed about Southern attitudes, concerns, and convictions” because he read southern newspapers, “he became increasingly indifferent toward Southern sentiments.” In Illinois, where he was physically separated from the South, Lincoln “appeared to be unaware of the extent to which the institution [of slavery] was woven through the fabric of Southern civilization... Where the South was concerned, Lincoln’s vision was myopic.” Robert W. Johannsen, *Lincoln, the South and Slavery: The Political Dimension* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 5.

Southern Midwesterners who had personal experiences of a planter class that they felt attempted to oppress white nonslaveholders.”²⁰

Kenneth J. Winkle’s *The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln* addresses the influence of migration on Abraham Lincoln more pointedly than any other study, providing a uniquely detailed and apt description of the different cultural influences acting upon Lincoln. Like Current, Winkle designates Lincoln a westerner. By focusing on Lincoln’s family and the Northwest, however, he characterizes that region as the only real option for nonslaveholding southerners seeking available land, despite the abundance of Southwest lands that beckoned potential migrants—particularly those already living in the South. This is what makes the decision of Abraham Lincoln’s father, Thomas, to migrate to the Northwest rather than to nearby slave states like Missouri a crucial factor in shaping Lincoln’s understanding of nonslaveholding southerners. Because Thomas Lincoln “left a southern slave state for a region of free labor, where yeoman families such as theirs could support themselves in dignity and aspire to reach the top of the social scale without resorting to the ownership of slaves,”²¹ Lincoln developed an early conception of

²⁰ Richard Nelson Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for our Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 162; Nicole Etcheson, *Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787–1861* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 127, 13, 109.

²¹ John V. H. Dippel, *Race to the Frontier: ‘White Flight’ and Westward Expansion* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), 114 emphasizes this choice that lay before migrants in antebellum America, noting that the “‘plain folk’ from the Upper South could have moved elsewhere,” besides Illinois and the other Northwest states. David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly’s study *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), xi, asserts that “The movement west always began with a decision”—where to move to, and why. While the migration patterns of family and friends resulted in chain migrations, many chose their new states and homes on their own. Examining the great migration of 1 million Virginians from the state in the antebellum period, these scholars point to migration as key process that changed not only the political, social, and cultural geography of the West, but that of Virginia as well.

southern nonslaveholders as downtrodden folk who, if they had the means to migrate, would escape from under the thumb of the slaveholding aristocracy.²²

Lincoln's campaign autobiography, written for Scripps in 1860, indicates the significance that southern migrations to the Northwest held for the presidential nominee. The quote most often mentioned by historians, that Lincoln's father decided to leave behind the South for the Northwest "partly on account of slavery," did not precede a discussion of the nominee's antislavery ideology and his reasons for espousing Republicanism, although historians have often placed it within that context, or in description of Lincoln's youth. Rather, this statement in the 1860 autobiography appears at the end of a detailed history Lincoln wrote about his own family's migration from the South. Nearly one-seventh of this entire autobiography is spent recounting this migration story, which includes the Lincolns' relocation from the state of Virginia to the border state of Kentucky and their resettlement in the northwestern states of Indiana and Illinois. Many Lincoln scholars have used the quote and context to reconstruct Abraham Lincoln's ancestry and early childhood, tracing the impact of the migration on his upbringing. However, this full page of text in Lincoln's 1860 autobiography suggests that both migration and antislavery, together, occupied his thoughts in 1860. Extracting his antislavery statement, alone, misses the crucial element of migration to which it is tied, while portraying the migration story as an early component of Lincoln's life neglects its

²² Richard Current argues our focus should turn to the question: What did Lincoln view *himself* as? Current believes Lincoln considered himself an Illinoisan, but also "thought of himself as, more broadly, a Westerner." Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln*, 157; Kenneth J. Winkle, *The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing Co., 2001), 12. Although Winkle's study significantly explicates the context surrounding Lincoln in Springfield and central Illinois, it does not place the ideology of these fellow southern migrants within a national context; nor does it extend all these influences to explain how Lincoln approached the secession crisis in 1860. His study ends in 1859, before Lincoln is elected or even nominated.

continuing significance to the Republican nominee in 1860. Releasing a crucial piece of literature he hoped would both attract a positive reception from voters and adequately represent him, Lincoln chose to highlight both migration and antislavery as crucial factors in his life. By combining the migration story with the simple statement that his father moved to the Northwest to get away from slavery, Lincoln recalled a large-scale process that had delivered thousands of southern nonslaveholders to the state of Illinois from 1820-1860.²³

Through his experiences in the Northwest, Lincoln developed a keen understanding of the motivations that spurred many southerners to live in free territory over slave, yet he extended this awareness into conjecture when he supposed white nonslaveholders of the South shared the same ideology and the same attachment to the Union. While the Unionism of particular areas—the border states and upcountry areas in the upper South—proved his conviction partially true, most of the nonslaveholding South ultimately fought for the Confederacy. Without his experiences as a northwesterner in central Illinois, Lincoln never would have understood, better than most, the similarities between northerners and southerners. He also never would have developed such an optimistic projection of southern Unionism in 1860.

By acknowledging that Lincoln's northwestern experiences lay at the root of his antislavery ideology, his conception of the South, and his approach to the secession crisis, this dissertation more broadly emphasizes the role that "experience," defined as "the name for everything that arises out of the interaction of the human organism with its environment: beliefs, sentiments, customs, values, policies, prejudices," plays in human

²³ *CW*, IV: 60–68.

thought, perspective, and belief.²⁴ Too often, portrayals of Lincoln depict an intellectually gifted man who rose from the common experiences of his youth and entered an intellectual and political sphere totally divorced from that earlier life. These studies seem to accept Lincoln's remarks about his early life as "a great piece of folly," represented best by the sentence from Gray's *Elegy* concerning "The short and simple annals of the poor," as evidence that he gained nothing from these experiences. Careful examination of Lincoln's own attention to his family history and to his invocation of the Northwest Ordinance as the best proof that the Founding Fathers desired slavery to be eventually extinguished from the Union, however, reveals a man whose experiences affected him greatly. Far from developing his approach to slavery and the secession crisis from cold reason and careful study of the nation's laws, alone, Lincoln's decisions during the secession crisis remained centered on the evidence he had gathered from his experiences as a southern-born migrant to the Northwest.²⁵

²⁴ This particular definition is taken from Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 341–42, in his explanation of Oliver Wendell Holmes' approach to experience.

²⁵ Donald, *Lincoln*, 19. John C. Waugh depicts Lincoln "logging time in the state library, combing duty volumes of congressional proceedings and digging into political history" before his Cooper Institute address, to find evidence that the Founders had been opposed to slavery. Although Lincoln pored over this written material, his conviction that slavery was both morally and socially evil and that the Founders had set it upon a course of ultimate extinction came from his experiences in the Northwest. Waugh, *One Man Great Enough: Abraham Lincoln's Road to Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, 2007), 297.

Chapter One

The Southern Antislavery Movement to the Northwest

A half century after the Civil War, Illinoisan Tillman Manus reminisced to the *Cairo Evening Citizen and Cairo Bulletin* about his experiences in the conflict. Born in Cannon County, Tennessee, in 1835, Manus had left behind the slave state of his birth for the free state of Illinois. As a new resident, Manus listened intently to the speeches that Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas gave in Jonesboro. A Lincoln supporter, he chose not to fight on behalf of his former, now secessionist, state of Tennessee but rather with Illinois and the Union. He thus “joined up on the northern side in the Civil War, as did his uncle. But his father down in Tennessee thought differently and openly disowned Tillman until the day he received from him, by a traveler going south, pictures taken in his uniform just before he left camp.” Manus’s decision to leave behind his southern family and slave state for a new society in the Northwest exemplifies the experience of many southern migrants to Illinois.¹

Charles Asbury and George McCarty, like Manus, understood the widening ideological divisions that often followed the physical separation of southern migrants from their former homes and families. Born in Uniontown, Ohio, to parents who had left Virginia for the Northwest, McCarty migrated to Illinois and became a member of the Republican Party. When the war began, his Virginia uncles fought not for the Union but for the Confederacy.² Charles Asbury similarly moved his family away from Virginia, travelling to Kentucky before finally settling in Sangamon County, Illinois, in 1825.

¹ The region of the United States that includes Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, though often considered today as part of the Midwest, was actually considered the Northwest, “after the famous Northwest Ordinance of 1787,” until the late nineteenth century. James R. Shortridge, “The Emergence of ‘Middle West’ as an American Regional Label,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (March 1984): 210.

² Mrs. Edward Joseph Filbey, comp., *Illinois Genealogical Records*, III (Urbana, Ill., 1938/39), 285, 287.

Thirty-five years later, Charles's Illinois family fought for the Union in the Civil War, while the Asbury "that lived in the State of Virginia, when the War begun," joined the Confederacy's 11th Virginia Volunteer's Regiment.³

These few instances entail quite literal depictions of the Civil War pitting "brother against brother." The phrase itself has resonated more with the general populace than with historians of the war, serving as a simple way to describe the social, emotional, and psychological depths of the North-South division. In this widespread usage, "brother against brother" does not typically describe a literal separation between family members, but rather, as Stephanie McCurry describes, functions as an apt metaphor meant "to equate 'national fracture'" with fratricide.⁴ Therefore, few historical studies have connected the cliché to actual divisions among relatives that separated fathers, uncles, mothers, sons, and daughters from one another. Those who have addressed the phenomenon focus largely on the Border Slave South, where Unionist sentiment most visibly clashed with secessionism. Amy Murrell Taylor's *The Divided Family in Civil War America* and John C. Inscoe and Robert C. Kenzer's edited collection of essays, *Enemies of the Country*, represent two examples of such scholarship. In these and many other works, the "brother against brother" phenomenon characterizes the opposing viewpoints of relatives, neighbors, and friends within a defined territorial unit—either a particular state, the Border South, or the Confederacy. None of these studies point to the

³ Descendants of Charles Asbury modified the family name from "Asbury" to "Alsbury." Helen Ruth Renner, comp., *Alsbury Gleanings from the Midwest* (Montgomery City, Mo., 1988), 1–2, 43–45. The Genealogy and Memorial Record in Renner's account was written by Brice William Alsbury in 1925.

⁴ Stephanie McCurry, "The Sisters' War?" *Women's Review of Books* 17 (September 2000): 21–23.

role of migration in creating or deepening ideological divisions that eventually pitted family, neighbors, and friends against one another in the Civil War.⁵

As the stories of Manus, McCarty, and Asbury illustrate, Unionist and Confederate sentiments did clash at a distance. The migration of thousands of southerners to Illinois and other northwestern territories separated them from their old homes and acquaintances. By 1860 northwestern southerners and citizens of the South existed so far apart from one another, both geographically and ideologically, that they chose to engage in civil conflict against each other. Historians have failed to adequately connect this single greatest social movement in antebellum America—westward migration—to changes in slavery politics before the Civil War. The political, social, and cultural repercussions of migration from the South to the West resulted in very real “brother against brother” divisions that pit Illinois migrants against their southern families. As Patricia Kelly Hall and Steven Ruggles have established, “it is reasonable to infer that a demographic experience of such magnitude would have profound implications for social mobility and political institutions.”⁶ As early as 1943, William O. Lynch noted in his brief analysis of “The Westward Flow of Southern Colonists before 1861” that a full-

⁵ Stephen Berry, *House of Abraham*, represents Mary Todd’s family as a singular case that uniquely explains the metaphor of “the Civil War...[as] a family crisis in a larger, more symbolic, sense.” See also John C. Inscoe and Robert C. Kenzer, eds., *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives on Unionists in the Civil War South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); and Amy Murrell Taylor, *The Divided Family in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Studies often define the “border South” in different ways. Basing her geographical designation in part on the prevalence of divided loyalties in particular states, Taylor identifies Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware as the Border South. William O. Lynch, “The Westward Flow of Southern Colonists before 1861,” *Journal of Southern History* 9 (August 1943): 303–27, identifies Missouri, populated by both northern and southern streams of migrants, as the infamous setting of the “Brothers’ War”. Other studies do not focus exclusively on border state families, but rather highlight particular cases of North/South, Union/Confederate family divisions, such as J. Tracy Power, “‘Brother against Brother’: Alexander and James Campbell’s Civil War,” in *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 95 (April 1994): 130–41.

⁶ Patricia Kelly Hall and Steven Ruggles, “‘Restless in the Midst of their Prosperity’: New Evidence on the Internal Migration of Americans, 1850–2000,” *Journal of American History* 91 (December 2004): 845.

length study of Virginians' migrations to the West was necessary. William C. Binkley echoed this call in 1951, when he urged historians to consider "a systematic study of the part which the South may have played in determining the character of that West."⁷

Yet while historians such as Philip Schwartz and David Hackett Fischer have begun to analyze the repercussions of nineteenth-century migrations from Virginia, Nicole Etcheson's much more recent claim that the ideology of northerners and southerners has been "little studied" still remains true today.⁸ The full consequences of southern migrations to the Northwest—especially in connection with antislavery politics in the 1850s—have not received the attention they deserve. This oversight stems, in part, from lack of source material. As Kenneth J. Winkle laments, "the political effects of migration appeared only fleetingly in the sources that represent the mainstay of nineteenth-century political history—aggregate voting returns, newspapers, and private letters—and therefore remain hidden from view."⁹ Historians have yet to devise histories that adequately describe not only the direct impact of these Great Migrations on antislavery politics in nineteenth-century Illinois but also the increasing cultural separation between migrants and their southern ancestry, as well as Lincoln's participation in these developments. Because southern-born migrants did not leave behind many written records and moved out across both main regions of the West, historians have too hastily lumped them all together, depicting those who migrated to the northwest as identical to southwestern-bound settlers.¹⁰ Finding themselves with so little

⁷ William C. Binkley, "The South and the West," *Journal of Southern History* 17 (February 1951): 6.

⁸ Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787–1861* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), xii.

⁹ Kenneth J. Winkle, *The Politics of Community: Migration and Politics in Antebellum Ohio* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), xii.

¹⁰ "The migration to southern Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana was a northward push from the same Carolina and Tennessee regions that also sent large numbers of people to Arkansas and east Texas." John C.

source material on which to depend, historians have instead relied upon northerners and foreign-born settlers—who typically looked down upon their southern-born neighbors as illiterate, indigent, and backwards-looking—to make up for the voices of southerners, themselves. These observers, witnessing the racist inclinations of the nonslaveholding populace and exaggerating the prevalence of illegal slaveholding in southern Illinois, tend to mischaracterize southern-born Illinoisans as either blatantly proslavery or proslavery-leaning. Since histories of Illinois have depended on these sources, historians have continued to misunderstand the anti-slave system ethos that actually drove these southern men, women, and children to seek new lives in free territory.¹¹

When southerners chose to uproot from their homes and move westward, they based their planned destinations on a combination of federal land policy, previous migrants' stories, and travelers' accounts. Most importantly, each potential migrant had the choice to settle either in territory set aside for nonslaveholders—the Northwest—or on Southwestern lands where slavery would endure. Therefore, the migrations from southern slave states to Illinois were not simply geographical but also laden with profound social, cultural, and political assumptions and implications. As Illinois-bound families bid goodbye to relatives and friends in Virginia and North Carolina, or even to those in Kentucky and Tennessee, they made a conscious decision to leave behind a society based upon the institution of slavery for new futures on the frontier of a free state. The most important legislation guaranteeing these southern migrants the choice between

Hudson, "North American Origins of Middlewestern Frontier Populations," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78 (September 1988): 401.

¹¹ As James E. Davis explains, "Yankees berated Southerners and others from pulpits, schools, public offices, and the press." Their prejudices, not southerners' attachment to slavery, played a major role in the cultural clashes that continued between the two groups in Illinois throughout the antebellum period. Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 251.

free territory and slave was the Southwest Ordinance, deliberately passed in 1790 without any mention of slavery. Thus, while the Northwest Ordinance prohibited slavery in Article VI, the Southwest Ordinance left a huge swath of territory open to slaveholding farmers. Southern migrants, therefore, exercised their freedom to move either to free territory in the Northwest or to the slaveholding region of the Southwest. That choice grew in clarity and distinction over time as, one by one, northwestern states adopted constitutions prohibiting slavery, while southwestern states sanctioned the institution within their borders.

Since both the Northwest and the Southwest received hordes of this southern-born nonslaveholding population, historians have often characterized the motivations of each to be the same—namely, land. Scott Philyaw notes that Virginians’ “choices of destination were almost evenly split between free states and territories and those where slavery still ruled.”¹² Those who did not move to the Northwest went to Missouri or Southwest territories like Arkansas, which gained statehood in 1836 and received most of its inhabitants from the states of Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Pushing out of Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, and North and South Carolina, these families “carried with them their ideas and ideals, habits and social customs, the plantation-slavery agrarian economy.”¹³ As James Woods explains, “more than 80 percent of the white population”

¹² Scott Philyaw, *Virginia’s Western Visions: Political and Cultural Expansion on an Early American Frontier* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 147.

¹³ Fletcher M. Green, ed., *The Lides go South...And West: The Record of a Planter Migration in 1835* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), iii. Joan E. Cashin studies the aspirations of a group outside the bounds of this study—proslavery southern planters who moved from the Southeast into the Southwest in search of soil not exhausted by over-planting. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33.

in Arkansas “were not slaveowners or members of slaveowning families,”¹⁴ but nonslaveholders seeking independent livelihoods on their individual farms.

In seeking to answer “what prompted several thousand small, independent farmers to relocate to a territory where slavery was becoming firmly entrenched,” historians have emphasized the similarities between northwestern- and southwestern-bound settlers. Lands in the Southwest, they explain, were often more attractive than those in the Northwest. As the Northwest filled with settlers, land in Southwestern states like Arkansas occasionally offered a cheaper alternative to migrants struggling for subsistence. In that particular state, a Land Donation Act and homestead law offered greater opportunities for landownership than most states in the Union. Southerners therefore often travelled to future states like Arkansas “to get more and richer land than they had and build better lives for themselves and their families,” much as Lincoln’s father, Thomas Lincoln, left Kentucky to attain greater lands available in the Northwest.¹⁵ Frank Owsley, furthermore, contends that similarities between the climate and geography

¹⁴ James Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment: Arkansas’s Road to Secession* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 30. Any statements like that by South Carolinian Congressman Robert Goodloe Harper, who claimed migrants to the Northwest “were from parts where slavery did not prevail,” while southwestern settlers were by nature in favor of slavery, grossly misrepresents the distinct nature of the two separate migrations. John Craig Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom and Expansion in the Early American West* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 24.

¹⁵ As S. Charles Bolton qualifies, “Americans did not want equality but rather the opportunity to improve their own relative standing.” In Arkansas, that motive was, for the most part, achieved. While the gap between the wealth of the planter class and that of the poor white and yeoman widened greatly by 1860, Arkansans believed the southwestern frontier had offered them a chance to improve their livelihoods that had not existed for them in the southeast. Bolton, *Territorial Ambition: Land and Society in Arkansas: 1800–1840* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 5, 123; Abraham Lincoln, *The Autobiography of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Francis D. Tandy Company, 1918), 7. Richard Current urges that “[w]hether because of religious conviction or because of resentment against the pretensions of wealthy slaveowners, Thomas Lincoln clearly disliked the institution when he chose to resettle in Indiana which was about the [sic] enter the Union as a free state.” Richard Nelson Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 162.

of southeastern states like Virginia and southwestern states like Arkansas enticed nonslaveholders to slaveholding territory rather than free land in Illinois.¹⁶

While the above factors certainly affected where southerners specifically chose to migrate, most southerners were driven by the determination to escape the grasp of an aristocratic planter class that stifled their opportunities to rise socially, economically, and politically. Nonslaveholders in the Northwest and Southwest, alike, sought land free of this slaveholding aristocracy.¹⁷ Malcolm Rohrbough explains how these aims were often fulfilled in states like Arkansas, where a “planter class slowly emerged in the south and east, with large-scale cotton cultivation and slavery its foundations,” while a much different type of society “emerged in north and west Arkansas. This was a region of small independent farmers, cultivating corn and grains, grazing large herds of livestock, isolated by geography and economy from the cotton interests to the east.”¹⁸ This section resembled areas of the Northwest like “Little Egypt,” the southernmost section of Illinois wherein many southern-born migrants resided. Other scholars have noted this particular motivation, explaining that “the experience of continued economic and political inequalities in these planter-dominated counties” of their home states “shaped common white migration and settlement in the Old Southwest.” McNeilly’s depiction of the Arkansas highland as “a society with slaves” much like the northern colonies prior to abolition, bears some similarities to territorial Illinois during the early migration period, when some slaveholders settled with their slave property. In this section of Arkansas,

¹⁶ Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 74–75.

¹⁷ John V. Dippel, *Race to the Frontier: ‘White Flight’ and Westward Expansion* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), 184–85; Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 21.

¹⁸ Malcolm Rohrbough, *Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775–1850* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 407–08.

McNeilly explains, “[y]eomen would not tolerate the legendary supercilious manner of the planter class and thus forced the ‘high-toned’ to yield.”¹⁹

Southern historians have frequently debated over the rigidity of class in the South, but rarely connected their arguments to the massive migrations bringing thousands to the West. Marc Egnal contends the slave system “created a pervasive hierarchy that placed some whites far above others.” Most political leaders—governors, legislators, judges—in southern states were slaveholders. ““When the yeoman farmer voted, and most did, there was little for him to decide. Both candidates were more likely than not to represent slaveholding interests.””²⁰

This depiction of a white nonslaveholding class escaping from planter domination did, indeed, resonate with both northwestern and southwestern migrants. Therefore, to a certain extent, “sectionalism defied political boundaries,” and reasons for moving to the Southwest often mirrored those for migrating to Illinois.²¹ To emphasize this similarity among all southern migrants to the West, however, is to ignore the important distinction between those who attempted a fresh start in another slaveholding area, and others who left slave territory behind for the free lands of the Northwest. Recent demographic statistics provided by Peter D. McClelland and Richard J. Zeckhauser show the “total influx of people into the New South was less than 15 percent of the influx into the Northwest in the years 1800–60.” These statistics, combined with findings that the New

¹⁹ Donald P. McNeilly, *The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 2–3, 6.

²⁰ Marc Egnal, *Divergent Paths: How Culture and Institutions Have Shaped North American Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 61.

²¹ Rohrbough, *Trans-Appalachian Frontier*, 417. Edward E. Baptist offers a significant contrast to this process of western migrations in the nineteenth century. Highlighting the role of migration in changing the history of the South, he focuses not on the typical Southwest, but on Florida, where some Chesapeake- and Carolina-born nonslaveholders chose to settle instead of the western frontier. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 38.

South experienced a “major exodus” from 1840 to 1860, prompts the authors to perceive not just an East-West flow to antebellum migration, but also a “*major South-North flow throughout the entire 60-year period.*”²²

Though the difference may appear slight, it held lasting implications: northwesterners would almost certainly have no opportunity for slave ownership, while southwesterners were guaranteed the chance to own slaves. Therefore, when Tillman Manus, Charles Asbury, and George McCarty left behind southern family members for the Northwest, their choices to live in explicitly free territory separated them from the slaveholding society of the South. Although the Northwest Ordinance was not systematically enforced in states like Illinois, where some slaveholders managed to keep their slaves after statehood and others indentured blacks for lifelong terms, southern nonslaveholders knew that Illinois guaranteed them protection from the development of a slave-based aristocracy, like that which continued to dominate their old home states in the South. They therefore chose to accept life in new, free territory over continued existence among slaves and slaveholders.

This crucial decision increasingly separated free-state bound southern migrants from their brethren in the slave states, as most southerners remained attached to the opportunities slavery provided them with, while northwestern newcomers often developed a more entrenched position against slavery. The gap between Illinoisans and those southerners who remained in slave territory widened so extensively and imperceptibly between 1800 and 1860 that even Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas,

²² These authors similarly question whether slavery or economic opportunity played a greater role in the migrations. Peter D. McClelland and Richard J. Zeckhauser, *Demographic Dimensions of the New Republic: American Interregional Migration, Vital Statistics, and Manumissions, 1800–1860* (Cambridge and other cities: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.

two Illinoisan politicians who understood so much about the Northwest migration, could not calculate its effects until the onset of Civil War.²³

Historians have been reluctant to portray these southern-born Illinoisans as antislavery, and a general perception of southern-born immigrants as proslavery-leaning bigots has persisted despite multiple counter-characterizations. Certain events in the early history of Illinois remain largely to blame for this misperception. The efforts of Illinois's own citizens to introduce slavery into the state, evidenced in petitions to Congress, the convention debate of 1823–1824, and the illegal slaveholding practiced by a small percentage of the population after statehood made it appear as though southern-born migrants pushed for slavery until the masses of northeastern-born settlers to Illinois overwhelmed their voices and votes. This general story is supported by the letters and journals of northern-born migrants who wrote more extensively than the southern-born, and who exuded a moral antislavery ethos that could not see beyond southern migrants' hatred of blacks, to their hatred of slavery.²⁴

Examples abound of historians characterizing southern migrants as “sympathetic toward the institution” of slavery. “As late as 1845,” David Zarefsky admits, “there were still slaves in Illinois,” and any candidates who wished to be elected for statewide office

²³ Born in Vermont, Douglas moved to Illinois in his adolescence, and his connections to the South grew when his marriage to Martha Martin of North Carolina made him the technical manager of a large Mississippi cotton plantation and its 150 slaves. Egerton, *Year of Meteors*, 7.

²⁴ Though not common, there were, of course, southerners bearing a great moral antipathy to slavery who migrated northwestward to rid themselves of all affiliation with the institution. Stacey M. Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 61, highlights migrants such as Mary Brown Davis, who “used her memories of Virginia” in Illinois “to pen real-life stories about slaves who proved themselves more fully of humanity and determination than their owners.” Merton L. Dillon, “The Antislavery Movement in Illinois: 1824–1835,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 47 (Summer 1954), 152, lists Methodist antislavery preachers who came to Illinois to escape slavery's moral evils. In other instances, slaveholders like Levi Compton, one of the delegates to the Illinois Constitutional Convention of 1818, moved from the South to the Northwest with their slaves, freeing them upon arrival. Illinois State Historical Society, *The Illinois Constitutional Convention of 1818* (Springfield, Ill., 1894), 344.

had to contend with southern-born voters in the southernmost portion of Illinois “who were basically sympathetic toward the institution and hostile to any type of government interference” of slavery.²⁵ John Craig Hammond and Robert Taylor similarly conclude that since the government did not actively enforce Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance, settlers in the states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois excluded slavery in their state constitutions “[o]nly with great difficulty.” Allan G. Bogue argues “[r]evulsion against the southern institution of slavery probably played little part in the thinking of the settlers of Illinois,” since southern-born settlers “showed so much attachment for the South and its institutions later.” Despite the increasing numbers of northern and southern nonslaveholders drawn to free territory by Article VI, these historians claim, the federal government’s refusal to accept a proslavery Illinois state constitution was the only thing standing between southerners and their proslavery desires.²⁶

To claim that all nonslaveholding migrants to the Northwest firmly rejected slavery would, of course, be false. Indeed, arguments in favor of introducing slavery into Illinois had been in place since the very beginning of the westward migration, and most often stemmed from southerners.²⁷ Although the sixth article of the Northwest Ordinance successfully convinced most slaveholders to remain in slave territories, the prohibition

²⁵ Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 29.

²⁶ Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion*, 122. Taylor follows the alluring, but false, assumption that mid-Atlantic and New England migrants the Northwest opposed slavery, while “settlers from Virginia and Kentucky wanted to use slave labor to bring their heavily forested lands into agricultural use.” Robert M. Taylor, *The Northwest Ordinance, 1787: A Bicentennial Handbook* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1987), 100; William O. Lynch, “The South and its History,” *Journal of Southern History* 8 (November 1942): 465–82. Allan G. Bogue cites Theodore Calvin Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818–1848* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1922), 70–91, on the convention debates in Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 18.

²⁷ One exception to accounts blaming southerners is contemporary Joseph Larwill’s claim: “what is very surprising is that a large portion of Eastern Emigrants from N England States are favourable to the admission of Slavery in this State.” Joseph H. Larwill Journal, Feb. 3, 1823, Joseph H. Larwill Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, (hereafter abbreviated ALPL).

was “continuously violated” not by nonslaveholders who accumulated slaves, but rather by slaveholders who disregarded the law and brought their slaves with them to Illinois. Many men who held high political stations in the state were slaveholders: “Pierre Menard, Thomas Ferguson, and Samuel Judy;...Alexander Wilson and Jacob Short, who were members of the House of Representatives; Benjamin Stephenson and Shadrach Bond, who represented the Territory in Congress; and Governor Edwards, Secretary [of the Illinois Territory Nathaniel] Pope, and Judge [Jesse B.] Thomas.”²⁸ Some of these men, such as Governor Edwards, actively opposed a convention to reconsider the slavery question. Others, like the speculators, witnessed “the migration of planters through these territories on their way to Missouri with their slaves and wealth,” and supported the opening of Illinois to slaveholders and their slaves. As New Englander Horatio Newhall remarked to his family in 1821, “many of our most influential...officers are dear lovers of slavery and would gladly introduce into this state the same system which prevails at the South.”²⁹

From the late 1790s to 1824, there persisted instances not only of slaveholding, but of attempts to introduce slavery to Illinois with written legal consent. During this period, citizens petitioned the federal government to allow slavery in Illinois territory, applied for statehood with slavery written into Illinois’s constitution, and, when all else

²⁸ John D. Barnhart, “The Southern Influence in the Formation of Illinois,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 32 (September 1939): 362.

²⁹ John D. Barnhart, *Valley of Democracy: The Frontier versus the Plantation in the Ohio Valley, 1775-1818* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1953), 200; Horatio Newhall to brothers, October 1821, Horatio Newhall Papers in Greenville and Galena, 1821–1846 Abolition Collection, ALPL. At this time, most of the migrants to Illinois were southerners. Therefore, when Newhall repeatedly describes to his brothers in New England that “a good majority are opposed to slavery,” and the “slave party” intends to alter the constitution through “their real, tho’ not their avowed object...to allow of the introduction of slaves into the State,” he pinpoints the exaggerated representation of southern-born Illinoisans as proslavery. In his view, the “slave party” is comprised of large slaveowners and has dubiously convinced some of the southern-born migrants to vote for a convention.

failed, called for a vote on a convention, ostensibly to re-consider the status of slavery in the state. As historian John Dippel explains, some settlers to the Northwest considered the opportunity of selling their land and moving again, and thus “a large percentage of Illinoisans wanted to see the slave system take hold in their state because of the economic gain they felt this would bring them...by selling their land at a higher price.”³⁰ Before the U.S. acquired the territory, French settlers held slaves there and some continued to do so into the 1800s. Recognizing the significance of this history to settlement on the frontier, Illinois settlers from the South like John McFerron argued that “owning slaves as property was a natural right that had been recognized since the mid-1700s in Illinois; therefore, those who previously owned slaves could not be made to give them up, while those who needed labor should be allowed to indenture blacks under voluntary servitude.” Assuring his fellow settlers that “slavery in Illinois had never and would never take on the characteristics of ‘the southern slave State, with all its horrible consequences,’” McFerron offered a convincing argument to yeoman slaveholders and nonslaveholders.³¹ When Illinois applied for statehood in the late 1810s, and then as her population grew only slowly throughout the first half of the 1820s, the arguments in favor of slavery grew more frequent and more popular. As Peter Onuf notes in his work on the Northwest Territory, “the short-run material advantages of legalizing slavery” were difficult for antislavery advocates to combat. In the early years, “the production of slaves had a more obvious and direct relationship to the commercial prosperity of the territory than did the growth of a free farming population still primarily concerned with eking out

³⁰ Dippel, *Race to the Frontier*, 132. “The proslavery party promised that the influx of slaveowners would drive up land prices and stimulate a local economy that had been devastated by the depression of 1819.” Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, “The Significance of the Northwest Ordinance,” in Cayton and Onuf, eds., *The Midwest and the Nation*, 17.

³¹ Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*, 18, 19.

its own subsistence.”³² Land speculators particularly welcomed calls for slavery, after unsuccessfully petitioning Congress to repeal Article 6 and legalize slavery in Illinois at the beginning of the 19th century.³³ Prominent southern men in Illinois, such as Governor Shadrach Bond, Representative John McLean, and editor Henry Eddy, pointed to Illinois’s ban on slavery as the cause of economic depression following the panic of 1819. Thus, immediately after Illinois was accepted into the Union as a free state, some men “supported projects to transform Illinois in a slave state.”³⁴

The convention debate of 1823-24, certainly a significant moment in Illinois’s history, has too conveniently been used to depict southern-born settlers as ardently proslavery, and eager to aid the proslavery cause whenever possible. Though anticonventionists ultimately defeated the convention to re-consider the state’s constitution with 6,822 votes, 4,950 Illinoisans ultimately voted in favor of holding an official forum to discuss state issues. Forced to analyze this period in Illinois’s history with few primary sources, historians have often generalized the vote by classifying conventionists as proslavery southerners, and anticonventionists as largely antislavery northerners, joined by a few southern migrants. Written evidence provided by northerners or Englishmen like William Newnham Blane, who claimed that “Those who have been the cause of this convention, are the men who have come from the slave-holding States,”

³² Peter Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 122.

³³ Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 8–9. As Berwanger explains, John Edgar and William Morrison combined their signatures with those of two other speculators on this petition. Their claim that the petition represented the will of the majority thankfully did not convince the House of Representatives, and in 1800 the speculators returned with a new petition containing 277 signatures. Tabled by the Senate, the petition came to naught.

³⁴ Merton L. Dillon, “Sources of Early Antislavery Thought in Illinois,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 50 (Spring 1957), 41.

corroborate this view.³⁵ The ideology of the white southern nonslaveholding migrants, themselves, has been held captive by such assertions, and historians rarely produce a portrayal of white southern nonslaveholding migrants that reflects their own convictions. While most acknowledge that the convention vote itself did not prove southern nonslaveholders favored the introduction of slavery to Illinois, the idea that southern-born migrants favored slavery still persists in the historiography of antebellum Illinois—particularly in works detailing the later history of antebellum Illinois. In many of these studies, brief sentences describing the proslavery sympathizers as southerners are extracted from outdated works, second-hand sources, or more nuanced arguments, and applied by historians studying Lincoln and 1850s Illinois as proof that areas like Little Egypt remained proslavery. These historians make the mistake of concluding that, because northern Illinois became so visibly antislavery, southern Illinois was in comparison proslavery and pro-southern.³⁶

The problem with relying upon statements made by foreign or northern migrants to Illinois is that they often did not distinguish between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, simply characterizing all pro-conventionists as “southern,” then describing southerners generally as proslavery sympathizers. Few, if any, direct records from southerners survive to corroborate these claims. Northern and foreign settlers and travelers, who typically provided source material for proslavery characterizations, often

³⁵ William Newnham Blane, *An Excursion through the United States and Canada during the years 1822–23* (London, England: C. Baldwin, 1924), 171.

³⁶ Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 25; Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 71; Henry Clyde Hubbard, *The Older Middle West, 1840–1880* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1936), 12–13. While Hubbard’s book exposes the error of viewing northern and southern Illinois as, respectively, representative of the North and the South in 1860, Thomas E. Rodgers comes to the same conclusion in regard to Indiana. Rodgers, “Liberty, Will, and Violence: The Political Ideology of the Democrats of West-Central Indiana during the Civil War,” in *Indiana Magazine of History* 92 (June 1996): 133–59.

considered southerners and southern culture inferior to their own, and typically generalized these individuals as lazy, racist, indigent, and proslavery.³⁷ Although John Dippel correctly points out that many of the convention supporters were nonslaveholders, the calls for a convention in 1824 were most vehemently vocalized by a specific group of wealthy Illinoisans—slaveholders, speculators, and large landowners seeking increased land values through the introduction of slavery. The interests of this elite group propelled much of the convention hype. Furthermore, while most proslavery advocates in Illinois were probably southerners, there were definite exceptions. A few speculating Englishmen wrote to their associates of their hopes that a convention would be allowed, and that Illinois would open its lands to slaveholders. Echoing the argument that land sales and migration had slowed due to slaveholders' inability to carry their slave property into this free state, David Robson supported the idea of a proslavery Illinois. If a convention did make Illinois a slave state, he argued, "it will make lands sell much better than they do at present."³⁸ English traveler Elias Fordham, though avowedly antislavery upon his arrival to the United States, declared that, while "I would not have upon my conscience the moral guilt of extending Slavery over countries now free from it...if it should take place, I do not see why I should not make use of it. If I do not have servants I cannot farm; and there are *no* free labourers here, except a few so worthless, and yet so haughty, than an English Gentleman can do nothing with them."³⁹ Perceiving the benefits that may be

³⁷ Nicole Etcheson provides numerous examples of both northerners and southerners mischaracterizing each other in *The Emerging Midwest*.

³⁸ David Robson to Shepherd V. Leslie, Sept. 21, 1824; and David Robson to Shepherd V. Leslie, July 26, 1823, James and John Dunlop Papers, ALPL.

³⁹ Elias Pym Fordham, *Personal Narrative of Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and of a Residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817–1818*, and ed. Frederic Austin Ogg (A. M. Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), 209–210.

derived from land sales to large slaveholders, these men backed other interested gentleman in their proslavery endeavors.

These authoritative or wealthy figures often presented arguments in favor of a convention that did not explicitly mention slavery, or else justified the convention on the grounds of democratic freedom. While some state authorities, like Edward Coles, sought to convince nonslaveholders that the convention had been devised by designing, wealthy men seeking slaves for their personal fortune, others asserted the convention as an exercise of Illinois's rights as a state coequal with all other states within the Union. James Simeone interprets southern nonslaveholders' support for the convention as a democratic show of force rooted in the very republican values that had spurred them to leave their southern homes. Adopting the explanation of John Mason Peck in the 1850s, "The whole controversy...had been caused by congressional meddling. Had the Missouri Compromise not aroused 'the jealousy of the people to resist this encroachment on their rights from abroad,' the struggle may very well have never taken place."⁴⁰ Thus, rather than seeking to introduce slavery into their state, many of the 4,950 voters who supported the convention most likely used their vote to send a message that the people of each state—not the federal government—held the right to decide that state's laws and policies. To hold up these pro-convention votes as proof of nonslaveholding southerners' proslavery bias therefore misrepresents their most precious values.

As Paul E. Stroble notes, "[a] topic not usually considered by historians of this campaign is whether many convention supporters sincerely wanted equal representation

⁴⁰ Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*, 215.

and democratic participation in the drafting of the constitution.”⁴¹ Indeed, James Simeone, John D. Barnhart, Eugene Berwanger, and Don Harrison Doyle argue the convention issue of 1824 did not revolve primarily around the issue of slavery, but rather, constituted a forum of debate over the very freedom and prosperity that Illinois was meant to offer its settlers. They generally argue that southern-born nonslaveholding migrants to Illinois were either firm “anticonventionists,” or conventionists who supported the convention because it displayed the right of citizens in a democracy to choose the laws of their state for themselves. These pro-democratic motivations—rather than any desire to introduce full-fledged slavery into Illinois—dominated nonslaveholding southerners’ concerns as they voted in 1824. As Simeone explains, “It was democracy—not slavery—that the majority sought so insistently and, in the end, so violently.” T. Walter Johnston similarly asserts that the war “between the pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces was largely a struggle among southerners.”⁴² John C. Hudson corroborated the fact that many southern-born Illinoisans were indeed anticonventionists. He points out that the “strongest margin against calling a convention that would have reopened the slavery question was provided by the future Corn Belt: the Wabash Valley, the Sangamon country, the lower Illinois Valley, and the good uplands east of St. Louis”—all areas dominated by southern-born migrants.⁴³

⁴¹ The author cites an Illinois *Intelligencer* article from July that alleged: “Slavery and many other bug-bears are made objections to voting for a convention—but this is all stuff. Can the people be *equally represented in convention*, is the grand consideration on which the question should turn. I affirm they can—*Disprove it who dare!*” Paul E. Stroble, *High on the Okaw’s Western Bank, Vandalia, Illinois, 1819–39* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 77–78.

⁴² Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*, 97; T. Walter Johnson, *Charles Reynolds Matheny, 1786–1839: An Illinois Pioneer* (Springfield, Ill., 1941), 14, explains that lowland southerner desired slavery, while “opposition to this group came from the upland southerners who had sought to escape the evils of slavery by removal to a free territory.”

⁴³ Although several attempts were made to establish slavery in the Northwest, Hudson believes “there was little danger that slavery would have become widespread.” Too many settlers, northern- and southern-born

Although Simeone believes these nonslaveholders would have voted for any argument that convinced them it reserved freedom for the white man—even if it opened up the territory to slaveholders—migratory patterns and primary sources clearly show that more than just an “anti-big folks” abhorrence of aristocrats motivated Illinoisans’ voting decisions, whether for or against the convention. Rather, this “anti-big folks” mentality was intertwined with a dislike for the slave system’s effects on their own livelihood. Therefore, while many nonslaveholding, southern-born settlers voted in favor of a convention, many did not. In regard to those who voted in favor, there is no reason to believe they would have supported the convention’s unqualified endorsement of slavery. When the issue had been discussed in 1818 before statehood, “Most of the antislavery arguments appear to have come from small farmers who had economic and social objections to the institution,” and after statehood, ever more emigrants from the South arrived “whose objections to remaining in a slave society impelled them to leave their homes and migrate to a region which they believed would remain free from slavery’s direct influence.”⁴⁴ Freedom, to these men, meant exercising power to consider a question fully and fairly—not ensuring Illinois’s future as a slave state. Thus, even had the supporters of the convention overwhelmed the dissenters, the likelihood that slavery would actually have been written into the state constitution remains miniscule.

Edward Coles, the southern-born antislavery governor at the time of the convention debate, understood the complexity of this issue for southern nonslaveholders and attempted to defeat the proslavery faction without treading on Illinoisans’ right to

alike, desired freedom from the practice of slavery, rather than the freedom to practice it. John C. Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt: A Geographical History of Middle-Western Agriculture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 113.

⁴⁴ Dillon, “Sources of Early Antislavery Thought in Illinois,” 41–42.

hold a convention. He especially feared that accusations flung against southerners by eastern newspapers “held language which is used here in a way calculated to do much mischief,” and would only ignite nonslaveholders’ indignation at other states’ attempts to interfere with a state affair. As Coles explained, “Whether we have the Constitutional right to make this a Slave holding State or not...to restrain the people of this State...is certainly bad policy.” To urge these settlers too strongly to support one position or the other would only “arouse the feelings of State pride, and State rights, and that natural love of unrestrained liberty and independence, which is common to our Countrymen, and especially to our frontier settlers, who of all men in the world have the strongest jealousy of authority and aversion to restraint.”⁴⁵

The inability of historians to translate this democratic sentiment stemming from southern nonslaveholding experiences with the slave system—which I call “anti-slave system” ideology—remains a significant issue in current historiography of the antebellum Northwest, and lies at the root of persistent mischaracterizations of southern-born migrants. This ethos that governed southern white nonslaveholders’ motivations to migrate to the Northwest from 1800 to 1860 has received partial explanation by historians of the South, some of whom assert that southern society’s separation of those who did not own slaves from those who did created a class barrier that reduced opportunities for nonslaveholding whites.⁴⁶ These works on the southern slave system, however, do not address the mass movement of southerners to the Northwest. Northwestern historians, meanwhile, tend to either accuse southern-born migrants of proslavery intentions, or else misleadingly characterize them as “antislavery.” Many

⁴⁵ Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, Sept. 18, 1823, in Jack M. Sosin, ed. *The Opening of the West* (University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, SC, 1969), 145.

⁴⁶ Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 91. See footnote 503, *infra*.

historians of the Northwest, focusing on this southern migrant population neglected in historiography of the South, trace the migrants' disdain for the slave system from their former southern homes to their new lives on the northwestern frontier. John Dippel describes Virginia and North Carolina nonslaveholders' increasing discontent with the slave system over time. Although "slave labor stimulated and sustained the plantation economy, bringing greater prosperity to the region as a whole," it also "created an unmistakable fault line in colonial society, dividing rich from poor and thwarting the hopes for social mobility that had originally motivated thousand of settlers to cross the Atlantic as bonded servant." By the nineteenth century, Virginians and North Carolinians unable or unwilling to accumulate slaves found themselves without a rung to climb up the ladder of economic progress. As the planter class consolidated power over the region, nonslaveholders grew ever more resentful at their successes. Meanwhile, the growing "predominance of blacks on the plantations effectively lowered the status of white agricultural day laborers and servants by—in the eyes of higher class whites—degrading the social value of their work." Whether planters noticeably cast a scornful gaze upon the lower classes, or nonslaveholders simply imagined a denigrating attitude directed towards them, their resentment towards the planter aristocracy, and their hatred of blacks, propelled many into the Northwest. A few, including some Quakers, held a moral antipathy to slavery as an abomination force upon the black race. Most, however, fled from the degradation the system wrought upon supposedly "free" whites.⁴⁷

Since the dichotomy of antislavery and proslavery insufficiently describes the anti-aristocratic, anti-black ethos embodied by migrants, historians have found it difficult

⁴⁷ Larry Dale Gragg, *Migration in Early America: The Virginia Quaker Experience* (Ann Arbor: Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1980). Dippel also emphasizes this distinction between religious and economic justifications for opposing slavery. Dippel, *Race to the Frontier*, 36–37, 56.

to characterize the general southern-born Illinoisan migrant as anything but pro-southern and proslavery. The tendency to view racism as a mere step away from advocating slavery further obscures the more nuanced position held by migrants escaping the slave South for the Northwest has consistently escaped our grasp. Merton Dillon, in his work on “Early Antislavery Thought in Illinois,” wrestled with this ambiguous stance of southern migrants. Defining antislavery sentiment in moral terms, Dillon finds only “a tiny group of church members to whom slavery was repugnant because of its inconsistency with their humanitarian and religious principles.” Since the other settlers did not explicitly display a moral conviction against slavery, Dillon concludes that although “some had left that area in order to escape from the plantation economy which had already begun its spread across the South, only a handful opposed slavery itself.”⁴⁸

In their studies of northwestern migrants, John Dippel and Emma Lou Thornbrough focus on the racial views of these former southerners. Pinpointing Indianans’ position as “neither proslavery nor antislavery,” Thornbrough concludes that “anti-Negro” best describes their attitude. “There were few persons who wanted to see slavery introduced into the state,” she explains, “but there was widespread and intense race prejudice and fear of the competition of Negro labor.”⁴⁹ John Dippel provides the history of this anti-black prejudice. Nonslaveholding whites in Virginia and North Carolina, he explains, gradually pushed out into the frontier of their own states as

⁴⁸ Dillon, “Sources of Early Antislavery Thought in Illinois,” 37–38. The Quakers made themselves such an easily-identifiable group of antislavery fervor that historians have focused on their migrations from the South to the Northwest. Though the prevalence of their written records as ensured that a study of “Virginia Quaker migrants provides one of the best opportunities to date to determine the character of eighteenth-century migrants,” historians’ focus on such a narrow definition of “antislavery” in these studies has only perpetuated the mischaracterization of upland southern sentiments in regard to the institution. Gragg, *Migration in Early America*, 7.

⁴⁹ Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850–1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1965), 13–14.

slaveholders consolidated their lands and accumulated increasing numbers of slaves. Soon, however, slaveholders also began filling up the Piedmont, crowding out nonslaveholders as they brought ever larger numbers of slaves with them. Taking the best tobacco-growing lands and surrounding nonslaveholders with a black population they had sought to leave behind them, many white southerners “came to conclude that a thriving economy and the absence of blacks were closely linked. By moving in large numbers to free territories and state in the Ohio Valley early in the 19th century, ‘plain folk’ whites were acknowledging that living in a slave society had served them poorly.”⁵⁰ In Illinois, their racist dispositions emerged in resistance to black migration, acceptance of incidents of slaveholding (as long as the number of these incidents remained low), and eagerness for indentureship of free blacks.⁵¹

Clearly, “antislavery” does not seem to capture this particular ideology. As John C. Hudson explains, these migrants held a position between the two extremes of proslavery and abolitionism. “Slavery was opposed by many in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois because they wanted no African-Americans in their midst; slavery should be kept south of the Ohio River and their states ought not to serve as refuges for runaways or even freed slaves from the South.”⁵² Furthermore, as James Simeone describes, white nonslaveholders despised the power that had been consolidated by land-owners in their home states.⁵³ Devoid of any moral justification and uniquely southern in its orientation,

⁵⁰ As John Dippel describes, census data for Piedmont counties “show a correlation between a continuing increase in slaves and a decrease—or, at best, a smaller increase—in the number of whites.” Dippel, *Race to the Frontier*, 85. Robert W. Ramsey depicts the similar movement of North Carolinians to the North Carolina frontier during the 18th century, pinpointing the settlers’ economic motivations. Robert W. Ramsey, *Carolina Cradle: Settlement of the Northwest Carolina Frontier, 1747–1762* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964).

⁵¹ Dippel, *Race to the Frontier*, 104.

⁵² John C. Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 113.

⁵³ Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*, 4.

southerner nonslaveholders' ideology shared little with traditional definitions of antislavery. Finding no better term to express the complexity of this viewpoint, I believe "anti-slave system" sufficiently characterizes these migrants. Following the lead of John Mack Faragher, who studied the motivations of southern settlers to Sugar Creek, Illinois, I concur with his observation that migrants' "objections were to the *system* of slavery, for, as a system, slavery offered a powerful symbol of the negative effects of economic progress in the South."⁵⁴

Despising the system of slavery primarily because it pushed nonslaveholders off their land, forcing them to become laborers just a step away from black slaves while a slaveholding planter aristocracy increased its power, these migrants held simultaneous deep-rooted antipathies to slavery, African Americans, and aristocracy. Rather than developing an anti-southern vendetta, however, they typically sympathized with the vast number of nonslaveholders and yeomen who continued to live under the system's domineering effects in the South. Dippel, Simeone, and a few other historians have described this anti-slave system mentality that comprised these southerners' ideology. Born in the South or in the West to southern parents, Illinoisans like Abraham Lincoln held a singular antipathy to slavery so different from northern views that many of them consciously separated themselves from northern migrants physically, socially, and ideologically. After witnessing firsthand the debilitating effects of slavery on whites, these southerners chose to leave everything behind for a new society that promised to fulfill their republican ideals. Far from seeking to impose slavery on the Northwest, they often vehemently denounced efforts by wealthy, powerful men to introduce the system

⁵⁴ John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 49.

into their free territory. Too often, historians have de-emphasized the overwhelming debilitation nonslaveholders had felt in slave territory and have presented their subjects as either proslavery or pro-slavery leaning. Or, they have correctly labeled them “pro-southern” for the wrong reasons.

The greatest impediment to resolving any and all misconceptions regarding white, nonslaveholding migrants to the Northwest remains the lack of sources from the migrants themselves. Admittedly, pinning down southerners’ antislavery motivations for migration during the first half of the nineteenth century, whether to the Northwest or the Southwest, remains extremely difficult. Two hundred years later, few records from southern migrants exist, and those that state explicit reasons for moving to the Northwest are extremely scarce. Richard Lyle Power openly laments this in *Planting Corn Belt Culture*, remarking that “[c]ompared with the handwritten materials left by the Yankee a silence hangs over the feelings of the Uplanders as they grubbed, chopped, and hewed in the Northwest.” He points out that historians of the antebellum South have likewise “reported an almost complete lack of personal letters of the nonslaveholder, the small slaveholder, and even the small planter.”⁵⁵ Philip Schwarz, who faced this problem while studying Virginia migrants, decided that under the circumstances, the best methodology would be to “tell some of their stories,” and use “census data and publications from the time” to “set the stage for displaying the dramatic and significant choices some people made, or made for them, to leave the slave Commonwealth of Virginia.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Richard Lyle Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture: The Impress of the Upland Southerner and Yankee in the Old Northwest* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1953), 42.

⁵⁶ Philip J. Schwartz, *Migrants Against Slavery: Virginians and the Nation* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 7.

However, those studies on migration to Illinois and the Northwest that depict nonslaveholding, southern-born settlers as anti-slave system corroborate many contemporary and later reports from southerners, their families, and foreign observers. Their work thus provides a foundation upon which present-day historians might build a more accurate portrait of this often mischaracterized group.⁵⁷ This anti-slave system mentality that propelled southerners northwestward may be gleaned from a combination of contemporary accounts and the statistical geography of the nineteenth century “great migration.”⁵⁸ Rather than moving to Southwestern lands available to them, over 150,000 migrants born in the Upland South (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas) chose to migrate to Illinois. Comprising 35 percent of the native-born population in 1850, these Upland Southern settlers made a distinct impact on Illinois’s culture and society, particularly in the southern and central portions of the state. Migration rates to Illinois remained high throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, with an increasing number of northerners and foreign immigrants filling the state by 1860.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Victoria Bynum argues that North and South Carolinian yeoman “protested planters’ abuse of class prerogatives rather than the system that underlay those privileges.” While I tend to agree with her assessment when applied to southwestern-bound migrants, I believe Carolinian-born settlers in the Northwest tended to identify slavery as the root cause of both planter pretensions and the recurring lack of opportunity for the white nonslaveholder. Victoria E. Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 32. John H. Gwathmey emphasizes the desire for land, noting that migrants “were of a pioneering stock, passionately devoted to freedom and ownership of lands of their own.” Gwathmey, *Twelve Virginia Counties: Where the Western Migration Began* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1979), 35. David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly’s *Bound Away*, 214, notes that “Most [contemporary] observers agree that Virginia’s great migration was drawn by one great magnetic attraction: land.” William O. Lynch emphasizes the attractiveness of Old Northwest territories due to the similarities they shared with upper South states in climate and soil. Lynch, “The Westward Flow of Southern Colonists before 1861,” 326.

⁵⁸ John D. Barnhart, argues the Great Migration began after the War of 1812, and was composed mainly of Upland Southerners who left for the Ohio Valley. Barnhart, “The Southern Influence in the Formation of Illinois,” 201–02.

⁵⁹ David C. Klingaman and Richard K. Vedder, *Essays in Nineteenth Century Economic History: The Old Northwest* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), 163; Douglas K. Meyer, *Making the Heartland Quilt: A*

Though scholars have disagreed on the actual power the two federal ordinances exercised in restricting or admitting slavery, it seems clear from antebellum demographic shifts to the northwest and southwest that “the discouraging effect which the Ordinance of 1787 had on the prospects for slavery in the Old Northwest has to be credited with setting a clear geography of alternatives,” and providing a haven for anti-slave system nonslaveholders. John C. Hudson applies this assertion directly to Lincoln’s political birthplace. “The rapid growth of the Sangamon country and the lower Illinois Valley,” where Lincoln often lived from 1831 to 1861, “was based on the same population source (mainly, the Bluegrass of Kentucky) that fed Missouri.” Whereas Missouri’s total population was 18 percent slave by 1830, however, Illinois had a comparatively tiny proportion of slaves, and in Sangamon County, Illinois, only 13 of the 12,960 inhabitants were slaves in 1830. These statistics clearly show the effectiveness of the Ordinance of 1787 in guiding antislavery settlers towards the Northwest, while proslavery southerners moved on to other lands permitting slavery under the Southwest Ordinance or the Missouri Compromise. Thus “Kentuckians seeking to avoid slavery moved to the Sangamon country and the Wabash Valley” much like Lincoln, while “their Bluegrass neighbors who wished to extend the territorial scope of slavery went to Little Dixie,” Missouri.⁶⁰ Similarly, while Matthew Mason explains that upper South migrants to the Northwest often settled there “precisely to escape the plantation system,” he also notes that “slaveholders and would-be slaveholders among them wanted to burst these confines” of antislavery legislation. Much more careful than previous historians to distinguish between the masses of nonslaveholding, antislavery southerners and a smaller

Geographical History of Settlement and Migration in Early-Nineteenth-Century Illinois (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 141.

⁶⁰ John. C. Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 7, 116 (quote).

proslavery contingent, Mason explains that most northwesterners “hated slavery, but principally because it made slaveholder aristocratic tyrants and limited opportunities for neighboring nonslaveholders.”⁶¹

Many other scholars further corroborate that the Northwest Territory “attracted, disproportionately, those migrants who objected to slavery. Some had moral objections. Others refused to compete with slave labor.”⁶² John D. Barnhart emphasizes Upland Southerners as “small farmers, many of whom had moved out of the South to escape the social and economic consequences of the expansion of the plantation and slavery.”⁶³ Nicole Etcheson, despite her insistence that southern-born migrants retained a sectional culture apart from northern-born settlers, asserts that “Upland Southerners who migrated to the Midwest removed themselves from the primary determinants of Southern culture, slavery and the planter elite,” in rejection of the plantation system of slavery. That system’s “aristocratic, unrepublican aspects, its tendency toward luxury, its devaluation of white free labor,” instilled in them a deep resistance to the institution of slavery.⁶⁴ Richard Lyle Power highlights the significance of this movement to the creation of the Northwest, pointing out that for those “who migrated to escape the presence of slavery, Indiana and Illinois remained for several decades the nearest free soil.”⁶⁵ As evidence he reprints a letter John Humpries mailed from Indiana to family and friends in Virginia during this period, in which Humphries declares that Indiana “is not old VA.—the curse

⁶¹ Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 145, 151. Mason further explicates the antislavery, anti-black disposition of most Northwesterners during the territorial and early state period of Illinois’s history, 151–55.

⁶² Stanley Lebergott, ““Oh Pioneers”: Land Speculation and the Growth of the Midwest,” in *Essays on the Economy of the Old Northwest*, eds. David C. Klingaman and Richard K. Vedder (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 39.

⁶³ John D. Barnhart, “The Southern Influence in the Formation of Illinois,” 360–61.

⁶⁴ Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest*, xii; Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 166–67.

⁶⁵ Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture*, 38.

of slavery does not exist here—it is literally true every Man sets under his own Vine and Fig Tree and none to make them afraid People here go ahead.” Power relates the sentiments of another settler, who proclaimed, “Let fools remain [in Virginia] to breed fools...I don’t wish myself back you may depend on it to be a slave.”⁶⁶

At the very least, Philip Schwartz argues, scholars of the Virginia migration must acknowledge that migrants’ flight to free states “was at least somewhat intentional when the migrants knew they were separating themselves from slave ownership and slavery. But what were their intentions? A person who had never lived with slaves could decide he or she would never do so in the future. That might have been an economic rather than ethical choice. It was still a choice against a slave society.”⁶⁷ Genealogical records and family histories from the states of Illinois and Kentucky contain some references to this flight by settlers, their children, and their grandchildren. As Karen Stein Daniel explains, “Southerners began moving into Illinois” after 1815 “to a great extent because of the expanding plantation system in the South. There is evidence to support this being at least a partial cause for John Munday Burke,” who had been born in Virginia, “and most of his grown children and their families to make that move from Kentucky to Illinois.”⁶⁸ Ethel Marion Smith remarks that “[m]any Virginians who had come over the mountains and settled in Kentucky had gone on, after a time, to Illinois.” Her forbears, the Pattesons, were one such family. “In the minds of both Patteson brothers, moreover, as I learn from

⁶⁶ Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture*, 146. John Reda likewise asserts “the Ordinance over the years helped shape the mix of voters who in 1824 defeated a proslavery initiative to amend the state constitution. Slaveholders were discouraged from settling in Illinois, while those opposed to slavery were encouraged, confident that the institution would eventually be eliminated.” Reda, “Joining the Union: Land, Race, and Sovereignty in the Illinois Country” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2009), 153–54. See also Evarts B. Greene, “Sectional Forces in the History of Illinois,” in *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield, Ill.: Phillips Bros., State Printers, 1904) 76–77.

⁶⁷ Schwartz, *Migrants Against Slavery*, 8.

⁶⁸ Karen Stein Daniel, *Three Generations of Descendants of John Munday Burke of Virginia, Kentucky and Illinois* (Murray, Utah: Family Heritage Publishers, 2004), 1.

a letter written by Uncle Marion at the time, was the thought that it would be better to bring up their children in a free State.” Their settlement in Sangamon County, Illinois, commenced in 1856.⁶⁹

Peter Smith and his wife Catharine moved from New Jersey to Virginia at the end of the eighteenth century. Their exposure to slavery convinced them “not to raise a family in a slave state, and the North West Territory being dedicated to freedom, Peter Smith decided to take his wife and children and seek a home in the wilderness.” After first stopping in Kentucky, the Smith family moved to the Northwest in 1794.⁷⁰ Brice William Alsbury reminisced on his parents’ story, remarking, that “When they arrived each family had to be a self-sufficing unit, but liberty and equality did flourish.” Unlike nonslaveholders living in slave states, Illinois “settlers saw the chance to break the bondage of social rank, and rise to a higher plane of existence.”⁷¹ In 1795, South Carolinian John Craig married North Carolina native Elizabeth Andrews. The family moved to Tennessee, then northern Alabama in 1811. Craig’s second wife, Nancy, however, was born in Pennsylvania, and her abolitionist philosophy convinced her husband to settle, at least intermittently, in Illinois.⁷² J. L. Hosick depicted his grandfather’s story in a letter written in 1843. Born in Virginia on June 9, 1812, Joseph Turner lived with his parents in Lexington, Ky. Until “on account of the slavery question they (and others) came in their own wagons, (prairie schooners), to Illinois in 1816.” Another relative in the family, John Chism, owned slaves in Tennessee and set them all

⁶⁹ Ethel Marion Smith, *An Informal History: Virginia-Kentucky Pattersons in Illinois, Their Forebears and Their Kin* (Washington, D.C., 1948), 11.

⁷⁰ Mrs. Edward J. Filbey, comp., *Illinois Genealogical Records*, II (Urbana, Ill., 1937–38).

⁷¹ Renner, *Alsbury Gleanings from the Midwest*, 45.

⁷² Marion Stark Craig, *John Craig and Some Descendants: 1773-1976. Two Centuries of a Southern Family*. (Little Rock, Arkansas, 1977), 2–4.

free when he moved to Illinois.⁷³ Claiborne Pitzer's migration, according to his descendants, was spurred by both antislavery fervor and the unavailability of land. "Kentucky was getting to be too thickly populated," and in his adolescence, Pitzer "became, through the violent emotionalism of the great revival, a deeply religious man and a convinced abolitionist. With Sarah and six children," in 1834 "he emigrated from Kentucky with some of their relatives to the 'free state' of Illinois."⁷⁴

These family histories corroborate contemporary reports by the settlers, especially in their letters to family members and friends who remained in the South. Lucinda Casteen, born in Kentucky and married to a Virginian, moved to Illinois during the 1830s. Writing from Versailles, Illinois, to her mother and sister in Kentucky, she compared the ease of living in a free state to that of living in a slave state, where whites found they had to work harder to achieve less. "[I]t would not do well for people in Slave States to take things as easy as we do," she explained. "[I]f they did they would have but little done." Casteen explained how happy it made her that Illinois was "a free state," and "people that have their own work to do are happier and healthier."⁷⁵ James Smith wrote of his troubles and joys in 1840, after moving to western Illinois from Maryland. "Although we are oppressed here by the hard times and scarcity of money still the richness of our soil, the low price at which it can be purchased, and the ease with which it can be improved and cultivated all conspire to entitle it to the appellation of the western

⁷³ Gertrude S. Wheeler, comp., *State of Illinois, White County Genealogical Records, Rudolph-Stokes Genealogy, 1201–1946* (Evanston, Ill., 1946), 23, 68. The authenticity of these stories deserves just scrutiny. Written up by the Daughters of the American Revolution, these tales were passed on to them by sons and daughters, or grandchildren, some of whom never knew personally the subjects discussed. Therefore, when contradicting stories call into question their validity, or the story appears outside the norm of contemporaries' expressed sentiments, I have chosen not to include them.

⁷⁴ Littleton Porter Bradley, III, comp., *Some Bradley Families of Central Illinois: their ancestors, descendants, and other relatives* (St. Louis, [1972]), chapter IV, page 3.

⁷⁵ Lucinda to Mother, Feb. 15, 1833, and Lucinda to Elisa Tomson, n.d., Lucinda Casteen Papers, ALPL.

paradise which it was received—a garden of delights greatly to be desired by the agricultural community of all sections who desire to make a livelihood by their occupation.” Smith concluded that “where the farmer can live no class need starve.” Six years later, O. H. Wallace composed a similar letter to those back home in the South, declaring that “I don’t wish myself back you may depend on it to be a slave—I am in a free State and a plenty of wirke and good wages I can get more for my family by wirking 2 days in the week than you can and wirk 6.”⁷⁶ A Carthage, Illinois, settler wrote to her brother in 1855 that she liked “the people here very much. The better class...verry free and social. No aristocracy comparatively at least none of that contemtable quality that is dayly exhibited in our city, yet.”⁷⁷

Wesley Williams, a Kentuckian-born migrant residing in Carthage, Illinois, hints at slavery as an impetus to migration in an 1849 letter to his son in Lexington, Kentucky. “There is one thing I ardently wish and that is to see you and your Aunt Sarah at my house in Illinois...I know she would be pleased with the Country, and should you get married you could do better here than you could in Ky. I confess myself greatly disappointed in relation to emancipation in Kentucky and truly sorry am I for it.”⁷⁸ Rev. Gideon Blackburn, seeking a missionary position, wrote to Rev. Absolom Peters in 1833: “I have fixed my resolution in consequence of my feelings respecting slavery to settle my family in the state of Illinois, and therefore, an agency in Tennessee or Alabama would be impracticable.” The desire to leave lands of slavery behind for free territory was echoed by D. G. McBride, who wrote from Wesley, Tennessee, in 1846 to an uncle in

⁷⁶ James Smith, January 28, 1840, and O. H. Wallace, Nov. 23, 1846, James H. and Sarah A. Smith Papers, ALPL.

⁷⁷ Angelina Hatch to Sylvanus Hatch, July 1st, 1855, Hatch and Fessenden Family Papers, ALPL.

⁷⁸ Wesley Williams to John W. Williams, Sept. 6, 1849, Wesley Williams Letters Collection, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, (hereafter abbreviated UIUC).

Henderson, Kentucky. “Dear uncle, you profess to be opposed to slavery. In this I rejoice to find that your sentiments corresponds so well with my own. I have ever been opposed to slavery. It is probably that I have saw more of the Evil of slavery for the time than you have as I live in a country thickly populated by large planters owning say from 50 to 200 slaves.” Because of his feelings against the institution, McBride concludes he is “tierd of the Retched sound of Slavery & I am Resolved as soon as we can sell out our possessions here out for a free country.”⁷⁹

These sentiments echoed the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, who after his trip to the United States in 1831 compared the degrading labor of whites in Kentucky to the free labor in the old Northwest, where slavery did not attach a stigma to white labor.⁸⁰ Two other foreign observers of American events, Englishmen William Oliver and Elias P. Fordham, also commented directly on the differences separating free territory from slave. Listing the many places, both in the U.S. and abroad, from which Illinois had accumulated her population by 1841, Oliver paid particular attention to those “from the more southern states; the latter, as I understood, having immigrated to this part of the country, owing to the dislike they had to slavery.” Throwing together the very different ideologies of anti-slave system, antislavery, and abolitionism, Oliver claimed these migrants were, “at all events, very generally abolitionists. Another reason might be their want of means to become slaveholders, a man’s respectability being, in a great measure, proportioned to the number of slaves in his possession.” A traveler whom Oliver met returning to his home in Vandalia, Illinois, from a trip to the St. Louis markets confirmed

⁷⁹ Rev. Gideon Blackburn to Rev. Absalom Peters, May 22, 1833, Edward C. Thurman Collection, Filson Historical Society (hereafter abbreviated FHS); D. G. McBride to Daniel McBride, Aug. 24, 1836, D. G. McBride Collection, FHS.

⁸⁰ Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, eds., *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 12.

his speculation that southern-born Illinoisans dislike the institution of slavery. “On asking him why he had removed from the South, we got the old story, that a man who had not a number of slaves and a large estate was *despised* by the planters, and was, in fact, almost deprived of society; as those who considered themselves above him, would hold no intercourse with him, and those of his own class were comparatively few in number.” Though absent of any sympathy for the enslaved, this man’s antipathy toward slavery was no less vehement.⁸¹

Visiting Shawneetown in 1817, Elias Fordham asserted that migrants so eagerly settled in that section of Illinois due its suitability in farming, proximity to trade routes, and it contained “freedom from slavery.” Most astonishing, he found, was “the perfect equality that exists among these republicans. A Judge leaves the Court house, shakes hands with his fellow citizens and retires to his loghouse. The next day you will find him holding his own plough. The Lawyer has the title of Captain, and serves in his Military capacity under his neighbor, who is a farmer and a Colonel. The shop keeper sells a yard of tape, and sends shiploads of produce to Orleans; he travels 2000 miles in a year; he is a good hunter, and has been a soldier [sic]; he dresses and talk as well as a London Merchant, and probably has a more extensive range of ideas; at least he has fewer prejudices.”⁸²

Other settlers, meanwhile, indicated that the presence of blacks had directly spurred them to leave the South. As the record shows, the desire to remove themselves from any close proximity to African Americans, free or slave, often propelled southerners

⁸¹ William Oliver, *Eight Months in Illinois* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1968), 29, 91–92.

⁸² Fordham first sailed from England to Virginia, travelling next to Pittsburgh, then across southern Ohio to Cincinnati, Indiana, and finally, Illinois. Elias Pym Fordham, *Personal Narrative of Travels*, 122–23, 128–29.

to the Northwest in the hope that free blacks could be kept out of their new states. In one depiction of an Ohioan's family history, Samuel Miles brought his family to Germantown, Ohio, from Kentucky in 1799 because "he would not rear his children among slaves."⁸³ James Hall noted in his *Letters to the West* an incident in which a free black man demanded the money owed him by a white Englishman. Muttering about his inability to obtain the funds, the black man termed the white man "'a mighty poor white man;' an expression which, in the mouth of a negro, indicates the most sovereign contempt. The blacks entertain a high respect for those whom they term 'gentlemen,' and apply that title with a good deal of discrimination; but 'poor white folks' they cordially despise." This ability of free blacks to operate on the same economic level of nonslaveholding whites propelled many away from their former homelands in the South, and led them to expect freedom from free blacks in the Northwest.⁸⁴ As historian of free blacks Stephen A. Vincent describes, "tens of thousands of southern pioneers...migrated north of the Ohio to escape they system of slavery. Having found it difficult and degrading to compete against slave labor in their former homes, most arrived at the northern frontier with extremely negative perceptions of blacks and an ardent belief that the Northwest should be preserved for whites only."⁸⁵

Thus, although nonslaveholding Illinoisans fled from slavery, their antipathy for the slave system stemmed from reasons so far removed from the abolitionist and moral antislavery movements that contemporaries and historians alike have mislabeled them as proslavery sympathizers. For these reasons, the convention vote of 1823–1824, incidents

⁸³ Mrs. Harry Heagler, comp., *State of Illinois*, I (Cooksville, Ill., 1947), 59.

⁸⁴ James Hall, *Letters from the West* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 142.

⁸⁵ Stephen A. Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765–1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 28–29.

of slaveholding, and southern ancestry have all left the impression that southern Illinoisans retained the proslavery culture of their former homes despite evidence to the contrary. The most compelling testament refuting this misguided conclusion stems from Illinoisans' reactions to the convention vote itself. As Gershom Flagg noted with relief, it now seemed that "a majority of the people are opposed to the introduction of Slavery." More importantly, since the convention issue had been decided, he believed "the question is now at rest forever."⁸⁶ Meanwhile, Morgan County, comprised of "Southerners, for the most part from Kentucky and Tennessee," expressed their "class antagonism toward the planters and their racial animosity toward blacks" by forming their own antislavery Morganian Society.⁸⁷ The typical nonslaveholding southern-born migrant to Illinois, whether he cheered the outcome or not, accepted the results of this fair democratic process and continued working to improve his condition on the Illinois prairie. Southerners voted for whichever side of the issue seemed best calculated to secure the rights of the democratic majority against an aristocratic minority and contentedly settled down once the votes had been tallied.

Over time, as Lincoln and other southern settlers forged new lives on the frontier of their choice, the society in which they had staked their claim grew around them, drawing them in to a new western culture. In southwestern states such as Arkansas, southern settlement "involved the transmission—virtually intact—of a culture, a set of values, and an economic and social system" that included slavery.⁸⁸ These families chose to become part of a newer slaveholding society, which eventually drew them into "a

⁸⁶ Gershom Flagg to Artemas Flagg, July 20, 1825, in Solon J. Buck, ed., *Pioneer Letters of Gershom Flagg*, (Springfield, Ill.: Illinois State Journal Co., State Printers, 1912), 40.

⁸⁷ Don Harrison Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825–70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 51.

⁸⁸ Rohrbough, *Trans-Appalachian Frontier*, 280.

united planter-yeoman front that ultimately and perversely defined slavery as liberty and justified its defense on the field of battle” during the Civil War. Over time, the distance between southwestern migrants and northwestern migrant from the South widened, separating these former family members, neighbors, and friends from one another not just geographically, but ideologically as well.⁸⁹

Fletcher M. Green’s assertion that “[w]hen sectional divergence split the Union in 1860 the upper southern states would not permit their offspring to be coerced, and Alabamians and Texans were only going back home when they went to Virginia to engage the northern troops in armed combat,” takes on new meaning within this context. Southern-descended and southern-born northwesterners like Manus, McCarty, and Asbury were also southern offspring, yet they did not return home to the South to fight for the Confederacy. By 1860 their section of the country had severed itself from the South. Northwest-bound migrants had embraced free soil as their new home, surrounding themselves with others of like mind. When war came in 1861, their separate political identities as Democrats or Republicans mattered little. Nearly all were for the Union.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ McNeilly, *The Old South Frontier*, 10.

⁹⁰ Green, ed., *The Lides go South*, iii. As Ed Gleeson remarks, “[o]ne of the many exaggerations that continues to surface in American history is the notion that Southern Illinois during the War Between the States was a hotbed of pro-Confederate activities.” Despite their strong southern ties, “Southern Illinoisans were, however, mostly *not* pro-secession and pro-Confederate.” Gleeson, *Illinois Rebels: A Civil War Unit History* (Oak Lawn, Illinois, 1996), 1.

Chapter Two

Anti-slavery and Anti-black: Building a Political Culture in Central Illinois

In 1824 Illinoisans had decided against holding a convention to readdress the state constitution, and thereby, the question of slavery. In August 1824 the immediate issues of democratic freedom and slavery subsided from the political arena. The emotions, ideals, and convictions that the 1824 debate had stirred up among the people of Illinois, however, would never disappear. Instead, they would infuse themselves into partisan politics and pervade the northwestern culture created by southern- and northern-born migrants in the state, contained there until these passions re-emerged again in full force during the turbulent decade of 1850s. Meanwhile, between 1824 and 1850, Illinois boomed. Only 18,000 settlers had arrived between 1820 and 1824, when the state's free soil status suffered frequent challenges by slaveholders and speculators. Prior to the convention decision, David Robson had worried that "One reason for times being so bad in the State of Illinois is on account of wishing to bring in Slavery which has been in Agitation this two years past—the Slave holders could not come in—and those who wished to live in a free State would not—for these reasons we have had almost no Emigration this two or three years past." In less than a decade, Robson's concerns had been lifted.¹ From 1825 to 1830 nearly 85,000 new settlers reached Illinois. By 1850, southerners still comprised the largest percentage of residents in central Illinois, outnumbering northerners by a small margin.²

¹ Robson wrote to an acquaintance in Virginia, prior to the convention vote. David Robson to Shepherd V. Leslie, Sept. 21, 1824, James and John Dunlop Papers, ALPL.

² As Douglas K. Meyer, *Making the Heartland Quilt*, 27, 286, depicts, the roots of these movements still lay in the South, and northeastern migration did not pick up until the 1830s and 1840s. Using Tables 6.2, 7.1, and 8.1, I found that 38.48% of American-born Illinoisans had birthplaces in slaveholding states; 36.47% in the Northeast (New England, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania); and 24.62% in the Northwest states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

The anti–slave state convictions driving many of these southerners to settle on free soil shaped Abraham Lincoln’s perception of the southern nonslaveholder and generated within him a sense that slave societies restricted the freedom of the white nonslaveholder. Debates and statements of central Illinoisans revolving around the issues of African American freedom, antislavery, and abolitionism composed a crucial part of the political culture in which Lincoln matured from 1831 to 1860. The opinions southerners expressed in their words and actions evoked a hatred toward African Americans, abolitionism, and slavery that contributed to Lincoln’s sense in 1860 that the South did not solidly support secession. It also shaped his assumption that the *southernness* northwesterners retained up to the Civil War mirrored the culture of the nonslaveholding South, reflecting the ideals of those southerners who had chosen not to migrate to the Northwest. Thirty years of residing in central Illinois, with rare visits to southern Illinois and Kentucky, imparted to Lincoln a very limited sense of the actual nonslaveholding southern mind of the 1831–1860 era, while his exposure to southern-migrants convinced him that he nevertheless understood the typical southern nonslaveholder. From his vantage point as a northwesterner, Lincoln did not perceive the transformations central Illinoisans underwent to form their new society; nor did he witness the increasing attachment of white southerners—whether they owned slaves or not—to slavery in much of the South.

Lincoln and his family became part of the accelerated migrations to Illinois after 1824. He himself described to biographer John L. Scripps in June 1860 that his parents had been born into “second families” in Virginia who moved them to Kentucky, where Lincoln was born in 1809. His father, Thomas, made the momentous decision to bring

them across the Ohio River to Spencer County, Indiana, in 1816, “partly on account of slavery; but chiefly on account of the difficulty in land titles in Ky.”³ This account Lincoln gave in 1860 tellingly connects slavery, land, and migration, reflecting the very process of development he had personally witnessed in Illinois for nearly thirty years. As he watched southerners pour into the free Northwest, leaving behind their homes, families, and neighbors in the slave South, he associated slavery (and anti-slavery) with migration. Kenneth Winkle is one of the few scholars who have contextualized the Lincoln family’s migration within this broader movement, noting that “a growing disillusionment with slavery” was “one of his father’s motives for leaving Kentucky.” This move marked them as participants in the first Great Migration that “carried thousands of other Upland Southerners farther north and west.”⁴ Winkle thus depicts the Lincolns’ migration as part of a much larger movement of people from the South, many of whom “carried with them an aversion to slavery.” Andrew Cayton and Susan Gray similarly note that “the first settlers were Upland Southern ‘cracker’ squatters,” who came to Indiana and Illinois just like “Thomas Lincoln (father of Abe), who illegally crossed the Ohio to carve out a meager subsistence on land guaranteed by our laws and treaties to be Indian County ‘forever.’” Yet these scholars do not apply Lincoln’s autobiography to his later association of slavery with migration in 1860. The creation of

³ *CW*, IV: 61–62.

⁴ Kenneth J. Winkle, *The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln* (Dallas: Taylor, 2001), 25, 11. Winkle and other scholars have revived the study of the Lincoln migration, which has long been a subject of interest to amateur and professional historians alike. See, for example: John Walter Wayland, *The Lincolns in Virginia* (Staunton, Va.: McClure Printing Company, 1946). Winkle does not, however, connect Lincoln’s northwestern origins to his perception of the secession crisis in 1860. My study uses much of the same context Winkle provides and adds Lincoln’s experiences in U.S. Congress to explain his response to southern secession.

central Illinoisan political culture Lincoln witnessed in the 1830s and 1840s, however, taught him valuable lessons he would carry with him to the presidency in 1860.⁵

Although Lincoln would share a history with these migrating southerners, moral conviction would always separate him from many of his fellow southerners who removed to Illinois, especially those who settled in southern Illinois. His family, and those of many other figures, including Governor Richard Yates and Peter Cartwright, the Methodist preacher who ran against Lincoln in his campaign for Congress in 1846, moved to the Northwest due at least in part to a moral antipathy to slavery. Most southern migrants, however, “viewed slavery less as a moral problem than as an institution that degraded white labor, created an unequal distribution of wealth and power, and made it impossible for nonslaveholding farmers to advance.”⁶ Thus, while Lincoln would find common ground on which to agree with these southerners who were opposed the slave system, there always remained a distance between those who believed slavery morally wrong and those who perceived it as detrimental to their own well-being. This separation between the two groups actually grew over time, as Lincoln became more devoted to the idea that slavery was immoral.

Sangamon County and the rest of central Illinois, where Lincoln spent the most time from 1831 to 1860, welcomed many southerners. Established on January 30, 1821, Sangamon County “lay at the extreme northern edge of the Upland South region and therefore straddled the boundary” between the region of Illinois that contained a majority

⁵ Cayton and Gray, eds., *American Midwest*, 71. Although Cayton and Gray are speaking specifically about Lincoln’s move to Indiana, the sentiment applies equally well to their later migration to Illinois. In 1937, Gerald R. McMurtry, in “The Lincoln Migration from Kentucky to Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 33 (December 1937), 386, alleged that “Historians have been prone to dismiss, as mere political propaganda, the slavery issue mentioned by Mr. Lincoln as a reason for the removal to Indiana. Such conclusions are not correct.”

⁶ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 6–7.

of southerners, and that which contained a variety of migrants from Pennsylvania and other states just south of New England. John Carroll Power lists some of the residents who settled there in his 1876 record of the “early settlers” of Sangamon County, and from his listing can be derived a general sense of the ratio between northern and southern migrants. The great majority of Power’s settlers arrived there between 1825 and 1840.⁷ Out of the 999 native-born heads of families or single individuals he lists, 670 had been born in southern slave states, including 227 in Kentucky, the state of Lincoln’s birth, and 237 in Virginia, where his parents had been born.⁸ Southerners thus comprised a large portion of migrants to the county in which Lincoln lived from 1831 to 1860. According to census data in 1860, Kentucky was the state that contributed the most residents to the county—so many that Sangamon actually retained “the largest number of Kentuckians in the state,” compared to every other county.⁹ New Salem, which during Lincoln’s years there remained a part of Sangamon County, grew largely from southern families who had “intermarried in Tennessee, Kentucky and southern Illinois as they gradually trekked north.”¹⁰

⁷ As Power explains, Springfield had been named the temporary county seat in April 1821, and by the mid-1830s had transformed into a bustling city in the center of the state—so much so that Lincoln and the rest of the “Long Nine” representatives of Sangamon County in the state legislature were able to successfully engineer the removal of the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield. John Carroll Power, *History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois* (Springfield, Ill.: Edwin A. Wilson and Co., 1876), 43, 57, 59.

⁸ Though Power lists more families and individuals than the 999, the 999 represent the number of families or persons for whom place of birth and date of settlement are also listed. These numbers were derived from taking the heads of families and independent individuals listed by Power, who moved their family, or moved with their family, to Illinois from 1818 to 1847. Only those settlers whose place of birth and date of settlement were included by Power have been extracted to form the 999. Power, *History of the Early Settlers*, *passim*.

⁹ Douglas K. Meyer, *Making the Heartland Quilt*, 144. See Figs. 6.8, 7.9, 8.9, 9.11, 10.2, 10.3 for migrant populations in Illinois.

¹⁰ Richard Lyle Power further drew on remarks made by previous historians to characterize the entire region as “peculiarly the child of the South,” up to at least 1850. Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture*, 1. Benjamin P. Thomas claimed southerners formed the “backbone of the community” of New Salem, and John Mack Faragher noted the prevalence of “‘white folks’ from the South” in central Illinois. Thomas, *Lincoln’s New Salem*, 7, 25; Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 45.

Although this ratio shifted over time, with more northeasterners than southerners having arrived by 1860, southern migration remained steady up to 1860 as slave state residents fled to free states. These southern transplants and their families remained Lincoln's most accessible source of information about the South and southerners, from whom he must have gathered a great deal of information. Whatever these men and women may have conferred to him in unrecorded conversations remains unknown. However, their diaries, letters, and other recorded statements express the elements of slavery and freedom that dominated their political culture, and Lincoln would doubtless have heard these views expressed in New Salem, Vandalia, Springfield, and other towns and cities of central Illinois.

Because southerners often voiced aspects of their anti-slave system ethos but rarely offered a summary of their views on the issues of slavery and freedom, white and black, historians frequently mistake their statements as evidence that they sympathized with the South—and, therefore, with slavery itself. Southern remarks on these issues often appear markedly different from those made by many northern-born migrants, and these differences obscure the common thread of antipathy to the slave system underlying many southerners' comments. Frequently voicing anti-black and anti-abolitionist statements simultaneously, southern migrants often revealed not an attachment to slavery and the South, but a very real antipathy for both radicalism and slavery. Many white nonslaveholders believed slavery detrimental to their own and their families' economic, social, and moral well-being. They fled from the South to the Northwest, castigating the

system they had left behind while retaining sympathy for those fellow southerners who remained in slave territory.¹¹

Anti-black sentiments prevailed among white southern-born migrants to the Northwest before the Civil War. John M. Palmer, an active political figure in central Illinois, explained in 1861 that he and his family “expected to be ride [sic] of negroes and slaves alike” in Illinois. Palmer resented the nonchalant attitude assumed by the state government, which would not take direct action to prevent slaveholders from moving into Illinois with their slave property before statehood.¹² White southerners occasionally revealed such deep resentment toward the in-migration of blacks that resulted when either their more wealthy fellow transplants from the slave South implanted slavery on Illinois soil, or when elites like Edward Coles used Illinois as a platform to free their slaves.¹³ Some migrants directly petitioned state officials to get rid of free blacks in their midst, as Hervey Heth did in Indiana. Heth obtained the signatures of other white neighbors and asked Thomas Posey to “use your influence, to have removed from this Neighbourhood a hoard of free Negroes, that has latly [sic] made a Settlement among us.” Heth threatened that whites might resort to violent force, or else “Remove from the Territory, and Leave a Lawless Bandellia [sic] of Free Negroes in their place” if nothing were done. Heth’s racist inclinations appeared most evidently in his assertion that the white settlers who aid

¹¹ In James E. Davis’s explication of frontier Illinois, he alleges that southern settlers “detested and feared slavery,” yet remained unfriendly toward blacks and abolitionists. Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 190.

¹² Autobiography Notes, 1817–1873, Box 1, John M. Palmer Papers, ALPL.

¹³ Some elites, perhaps to prevent social envy and distrust, followed the example of Ninian Edwards. Both an Illinoisan and a slaveholder, Edwards served as Governor of Illinois Territory but kept his twenty-two slaves in Missouri, which “would have been the fourth-highest number listed in the 1820 Illinois Census.” Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*, 83.

these blacks are naught but “White Negroes,” representing a “base and contemptable” portion of the population.¹⁴

From the first days of statehood, the residents of Illinois legislated to prevent the immigration of blacks. The entire Northwest, due partly to the influx of southerners, “was the region most firmly committed to white supremacy” outside the South, and most northwestern states passed legislation restricting either the immigration or rights of blacks. Illinois passed laws to limit both.¹⁵ The Illinois Constitution drawn up in 1818 dictated that “[n]either slavery nor involuntary servitude shall hereafter be introduced into this state,” and no “male person arrived at the age of twenty one years, nor female person arrived at the age of eighteen years,” may be held “as a servant under any indenture hereafter made, unless such person shall enter into such indenture while in a state of perfect freedom.” The framers were careful to protect the rights of whites who held slaves or indentured servants under the previous laws of the territory, as well as whites who came to the Northwest seeking a haven for whites. Slavery had first been sanctioned and introduced in Illinois by the French, then continued under the English before the United States acquired the territory. The Northwest Ordinance prohibited slavery, but also guaranteed the right of current inhabitants to retain their slaves. Therefore, by decreeing that slavery should not be “introduced,” the Illinois Constitution ensured that any slaveholders who had entered the Illinois territory previous to statehood could legally retain their slaves. Nevertheless, the Ordinance’s protection of Illinois and

¹⁴ Hervey Heth to Thomas Posey, March 3, 1814, [William H. English Collection], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, (hereafter abbreviated UC). Accessed via *The First American West*, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award99/icuhtml/fawhome.html>.

¹⁵ Voegeli, *Free but not Equal*, 1. Malcolm J. Rohrbough, “Diversity and Unity in the Old Northwest, 1790–1850: Several Peoples Fashion a Single Region,” in Lloyd H. Hunter, ed., *Pathways to the Old Northwest: An Observance of the Bicentennial of the Northwest Ordinance* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1988).

the rest of the Northwest Territory from slavery led most slaveholders to move to the Southwest or continue onward to Missouri for a more secure guarantee of the right to hold slaves. Few took the risk of moving to the Illinois Territory with their slaves, despite protection provided in the Constitution of 1818 for those who had violated the Northwest Ordinance and migrated to Illinois with their slaves between 1787 and 1818. However, the Illinois Constitution permitted hired slaves to work in the Shawneetown salt works for a brief time (until 1825), further blurring the line between slavery and freedom.¹⁶

Besides these provisions, the Constitution also created the foundation of a unique practice that gained wide acceptance among Illinoisans, though it was largely phased out by 1850: indenturing young blacks. Article 6, Section 1, further stated that no indenture “where the term of service exceeds one year” shall “be of the least validity except those given in cases of apprenticeship.” Though this section did not specifically state the length of these indentures, the laws of the Illinois Territory had stated that children “born of such person, negros or mulattos, shall become free, the males at the age of twenty one years, the females at the age of eighteen years.” Furthermore, black freemen currently residing in the state or entering Illinois in the future could enjoy but limited rights. Denied the full benefits of white citizenship, blacks could not vote, serve as jurors, or join the state militia. From the very beginning, whites in Illinois, both northern and southern, made it clear that free soil was meant for free whites.¹⁷

Since the Constitution of 1818 did not take any measures to explicitly exclude blacks from the state, Illinoisans enacted a series of Black Codes to prevent their

¹⁶ *Constitution of the State of Illinois, 1818*, Art. 6, Sec. 1, 2, Illinois Digital Archives, <http://www.idaillinois.org/cdm/ref/collection/isl2/id/12600/show/12572>; Norman Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois, and of the Slavery Agitation in that State, 1719–1864* (Chicago, Ill.: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1904), 6–7.

¹⁷ *Constitution of the State of Illinois, 1818*, Art. 6, Sec. 3, Illinois Digital Archives.

immigration.¹⁸ Passed just one year after Illinois ratified its constitution, the Black Code of 1819 attempted to prevent free blacks from either migrating to the state or enjoying the benefits of citizenship. The code prohibited slaveholders from bringing their slaves to Illinois to emancipate them, and mandated that any free blacks entering the state must provide a certificate of freedom and register themselves and their families with the state. Punishment for violating the laws held whites as accountable as blacks. Any slaveholders arriving with slaves after 1819 could be fined, and white employers who hired African Americans without a certificate of freedom would be subject to penalties as well. Although the Black Code of 1819 also held masters accountable before the Circuit Court for any severe punishment resulting in servants' or slaves' injury or death, its main purpose was to reserve Illinois for white citizens. Servants and slaves were to be punished by whipping for any violation of these laws, and if charged with laziness or wrongdoing, they could also be lawfully whipped by their masters.¹⁹ The Black Code of 1829, meant to buttress the provisions of the 1819 code, reiterated that “no black or mulatto person, not being a citizen of some one of the United States, shall be permitted to reside in this state, until such person shall produce to the county commissioners' court where he or she is desirous of settling, a certificate of his or her freedom, which certificate shall be duly authenticated.” This revised code also stipulated that black freedmen post a \$1,000 bond, in addition to providing the necessary certifications.²⁰

¹⁸ Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery*, 32, 25.

¹⁹ Zebina Eastman, *Black Code of Illinois* (Chicago, Ill., 1883), 32–26; Carol Pirtle, *Escape Betwixt Two Suns: A True Tale of the Underground Railroad in Illinois* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 8; Juliet E. K. Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 76.

²⁰ Black Code language reprinted in Walker, *Free Frank*, 77; see also Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery*, 32.

Although the number of indentured servants and slaves in Illinois decreased from 1825 to 1850, white efforts to exclude African Americans from both citizenship and the state never abated. The Black Codes of 1819 and 1829 had passed the state legislature but remained entirely separate from the Illinois Constitution until 1847, when delegates met in Springfield to revise the 1818 constitution. The assembly, comprised of at least seventy-six southerners, decided to include a clause in this updated constitution restricting the immigration of African Americans to the state.²¹ Perhaps due to the controversial nature of such a provision, legislators decided to remove the clause and have their constituents vote on each—the Constitution and the prohibition article—separately. Astonishingly, in the election held March 6, 1848, over 70 percent of the voters approved the clause, with 50,261 voting in favor of the clause, alone, and 21,297 voting against it.²² As Kenneth J. Winkle notes, “[t]wo-thirds of northeastern natives” and “nine-tenths of native southerners” voted in favor of the clause. The desire to preserve Illinois’s free soil for white settlers clearly attracted the support of many northerners as well as many anti-slave system southerners.²³

Despite these findings, scholars often persist in characterizing these laws and the continuation of indentures and slaveholding in Illinois as evidence that “[m]any of the

²¹ “The Constitutional Convention...included only 7 native Illinoisans. There were 26 New Englanders, 38 from the middle states, 35 from the South Atlantic seaboard, 41 from Kentucky and Tennessee, and 10 from Ohio and Indiana...the farmers with 75 were most numerous, but there were 54 lawyers, besides 12 physicians, 9 merchants, 5 mechanics, and 7 others.” Arthur Charles Cole, *The Constitutional Debates of 1847*, in *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library* 14 (Springfield, 1919), xvi–xvii.

²² Illinoisans decided handily in favor of the constitution, with 60,585 votes for it, and 15,903 against. Cole, *Constitutional Debates*, xxx.

²³ With this decision, Winkle noted, “Illinois joined Indiana and Oregon as the only states in the Union that restricted African American immigration in their constitutions.” Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 261. Nichole Etcheson had previously argued that the northern section of Illinois unanimously opposed the clause, and the central Illinois split its votes. Etcheson, *Emerging Midwest*, 101.

non-slaveholding settlers also favored the institution [of slavery].”²⁴ White Illinoisans certainly embraced the opportunity to apprentice blacks and to exploit their labor for their own gain. Records from Gallatin County, Illinois, show that thirteen new indentures were arranged between 1813 and 1837, while only three slaves were manumitted during that period. Similar records for New Salem and Springfield prove that entering into indentures remained a common practice with which Lincoln would have been well familiar. The evidence provided in these indenture records, however, indicated that these agreements followed the codified laws of Illinois, which only allowed female and male youths up to the age of eighteen and twenty-one, respectively, to be apprenticed. In 1830, just a year before Lincoln arrived in New Salem, George Spears made an indentured agreement with “Sary...a girl of colour” aged six, who had been orphaned. The document declared that “Sary by and with the approbation of Elihu Bone, Abram Bergen, Justices of the peace in and for the county aforesaid [Sangamon] hath this day hereby bound herself to George Spears as a servant, him to faithfully serve, until she arrives at the age of eighteen years.”²⁵

Additional records of indentures from Sangamon County provide some explanation of the nature of “faithful service” rendered by these young apprentices. An indenture made between Richard E. Bennett and “Sarah Miller a mulatto girl aged ten years” in 1836 “bound herself apprentice...to learn the art and mystery of common domestic labor.” She “shall serve his lawful secrets and commands shall keep and obey” until the age of eighteen. Charles Edwin Reed and Shelby, as male apprentices, were bound to learn “the art & mystery of farming” and “the arts and mysteries of domestic

²⁴ Paul Finkelman, “Evading the Ordinance: The Persistence of Bondage in Indiana and Illinois,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (Spring 1989): 21.

²⁵ Folder 1, Gallatin County, Ill. Legal Documents; Folder 2, New Salem, Ill. Records, 1827–1838, ALPL.

employment,” respectively, until the age of twenty-one. These contracts suggest that black apprentices, though they may have received useful training for future employment, worked primarily as servants for the benefit of their white employers.²⁶

Many white settlers in central Illinois unquestionably took advantage of the laws prescribed in the 1818 Constitution and black codes to acquire servants who might labor for them in return for simple food, clothing, shelter, and experience. Very few instances survive depicting incidents in which whites actively assisted or defended blacks in their midst. The laws merely upheld many Illinoisans’ white supremacist belief that blacks were, and would always be, inferior to whites and therefore not deserving of full citizenship on the free soil of Illinois. Abraham Scholl, formerly of Kentucky, exemplified a very small percentage of southerners “known to have ‘loathed slavery’” but who also proved willing to help neighboring free blacks in their own “struggle to free the family from the galling yoke of southern slavery.” Some “manumission settlements,” where former slaveholders had settled their freed slaves prior to Illinois statehood, also persisted in their protection of free blacks. However, most white settlers sought to subjugate blacks through servitude or restrictions on citizenship.²⁷ As Winkle points out,

²⁶ This agreement was made with the consent of Isabella Thornton, her mother, and Charles Thornton, her stepfather. Folder 1, New Salem, Ill. Records, 1827–1838; Sangamon Co., Ill. Indentures of Apprenticeship, 1834–1854, ALPL.

²⁷ Walker, *Free Frank*, 114. John Lockart of Hamilton County, Ill., whose place of birth (North or South) is unknown, called forth the “Humanity and philanthropic feelings” of Henry Eddy in his letter written May 4, 1830 concerning a woman held in servitude in his county. Her master, Mr. John Forrester, “did by force and violence remove said woman out of the state, or in her words run her into a Slave state, and is supposed he done so for the purpose of enslaving her for life.” Lockart was approached by the woman’s husband, and wrote to Eddy hoping that he could secure the woman’s freedom. He made sure to emphasize, however, that “I don’t want my name mentioned in the matter, as I don’t have no interest in the case, farther than the cause of humanity.” John Lockart to Henry Eddy, May 4, 1830, Henry Eddy Papers, UIUC.

only thirty-eight African Americans lived in Sangamon County when Lincoln arrived there in 1831. Of those thirty-eight, over two-thirds were free.²⁸

It is imperative that these indentures, the Black Codes, and acceptance of rare incidents of slaveholding be understood for what they were—a “manifestation of racism, not an endorsement of slavery.”²⁹ David Brion Davis usefully places the number of slaves in Illinois in national perspective, comparing the situation there to the persistence of slavery elsewhere in the “free” North. By 1820, for example, “there were still over 10,000 slaves in New York and more than 7,500 in New Jersey; in Illinois there were only 917.” After that date the presence of slaves decreased rapidly, and by 1840 only 331 slaves remained in Illinois. Given this comparison, it appears almost astonishing that Illinois, composed of such reputedly productive, enterprising lands, and inhabited by droves of southerners, contained so few slaves within its borders. Coupling these statistics with the statements of southerners opposing the system of slavery and the absence of wide-scale slavery or indentures in the state, it becomes ever more clear that most southern-born migrants despised slavery as equally as they despised blacks. Those white southerners who had fled from slavery typically accepted isolated cases of slaveholding or indentured servitude as exceptions that did not disrupt the free soil opportunities available to them.³⁰

²⁸ Walker, *Free Frank*, 79; Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 251. Winkle’s statistics accounting for 1/3 of the African American population in Sangamon County being unfree include indentured servants.

²⁹ Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 124.

³⁰ David Brion Davis, “The Significance of Excluding Slavery from the Old Northwest,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 84 (March 1988): 87. Davis disagrees with Finkelman’s assertions that the Northwest Ordinance was comparatively insignificant, arguing that Finkelman’s view “ignore[s] the extraordinary power of antislavery ideology.” Ibid., 78. As John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 48–49, relates regarding Sugar Creek, “[n]o one...seemed to object to the presence of these few blacks as household servants.” Rather, the southern farmers held them “in the utmost contempt; not allowing them to be of the same species of themselves.” Winkle explains that anti-black attitudes in Springfield amounted to “endorsement of the

From the very beginning, a political culture developed in the northwestern state of Illinois that emphasized freedom for white men and their families. In central Illinois a more moderate set of political principles predominated, as southerners and northerners encountered one another's convictions and negotiated among themselves. From Lincoln's arrival in New Salem, Sangamon County, central Illinois in 1831, he inevitably became privy to these opinions about free blacks, especially as his involvement in politics and the legal profession increased. His public statements often reflected these attitudes and point to his own grasp of the political culture dominating central Illinois.³¹

Lincoln's exposure to these issues began with his 1832 campaign for a seat in the state legislature, in which he managed to gain the strong support of his largely Jacksonian neighborhood, securing 277 out of the 300 New Salem votes cast in the August 6, 1832, election.³² Though he lost the election, Lincoln remained active in local politics, being appointed secretary at a bipartisan meeting held May 1, 1834, "for the purpose of nominating a suitable person to fill the office of Governor of this State," and serving as a clerk in the election of 1834. Though Lincoln would highlight the freedom of African Americans as a major political tenet in the 1850s, it was in the court of law that he most directly faced the ambiguity of Illinois's position on free and enslaved blacks. In 1841 Lincoln argued before the Illinois Supreme Court that a black girl had been enslaved by a white man in Illinois—an action illegal under the Illinois Constitution and Black codes—and was therefore "free under the provisions prohibiting slavery in both the Ordinance of

Black Laws that reduce African Americans to the status of second-class citizens." Winkle, *The Young Eagle*, 252.

³¹ Arvarh E. Strickland, "The Illinois Background of Lincoln's Attitude Toward Slavery and the Negro," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56 (Autumn 1963), 475, notes that Lincoln "by and large, reflected the sentiment of the mid-section of the state, centering around Springfield, where the extreme views of the northern and southern sections met and were moderated."

³² *CW*, I: 9 (see footnote 1).

1787 and the state constitution.” In Lincoln’s second, most infamous case, he represented a Kentucky slave owner who brought his slaves to work on his Illinois lands. Lincoln argued that since “the slaves had not been brought into the state to stay permanently,” they therefore “were not freed by Illinois law.” The arguments Lincoln devised in these cases reflected those made by his fellow Illinoisans. Nearly all believed slavery received no sanction in the state—whether from the terms of the Northwest Ordinance or the laws set down in the Illinois Constitution. The ability of slaveholders to temporarily transport their slaves into or across free territory, however, had been upheld by the Illinois Supreme Court in the 1843 *Willard* decision. As Lincoln would have been well aware, Illinois’s position aligned with most southern courts, which had ruled “that slaves brought into free states on a transitory basis remained slaves and only those who took up permanent residence were freed.”³³

Though central Illinoisans remained divided over their opinions of slaves and freed blacks, the section overwhelmingly rejected abolitionism, which seemed the very pinnacle of radicalism—a perpetual evil—to many southern nonslaveholders. As John Russell explained to his friend, journalist Thomas Gregg, in 1839, he could write anything in his Illinois newspaper, “except on *Abolition*.”³⁴ Settlers resisted abolition, in part, because abolitionists’ solution for freed slaves often involved shuffling them to free

³³ *CW*, I: 21–24; Strickland, “The Illinois Background of Lincoln’s Attitude,” 476–77; Charles Robert McKirdy, *Lincoln Apostate: The Matson Slave Trial* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 21, 82. As Winkle elaborates in *Young Eagle*, 259, “the two slave cases say little about Lincoln’s attitude toward slavery and race.” They do provide an indication that Lincoln understood the laws and political culture of the state, however.

³⁴ John Russell to Thomas Gregg, Jan. 10, 1839, in John T. Flanagan and John Russell, “Six Letters by John Russell,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 44 (Spring 1951): 33. The charge of abolitionism also served as a potent political weapon, as in the case of a Pike County sheriff candidate whose campaign deflated when opponents claimed he was an abolitionist. To overcome the damage wreaked upon his campaign, supporters released a signed statement declaring: “from our personal knowledge he is no abolitionist and that the report of his being such is found on falsehood and circulated for slanderous purposes.” Walker, *The Young Eagle*, 152.

states like Illinois and Indiana. Alabama slaveholder Eli H. Lide described an incident in 1840 when “one of the vice Presidents of the foreign missionary Board has sent his circular on abolition to all the Baptist ministers of Alabama...requiring them to use their influence in favor of Abolition and to take their negroes and go to Ohio or some of the non-slave holding states.”³⁵ Fearing “that the lack of restrictions on Negro immigration would cause their states to become a dumping ground for southern free Negroes and manumitted slaves who were forced by the laws of the slave states to emigrate,” northwesterners bolstered their black codes.³⁶ Though they became citizens of the free West, southerners often felt more sympathy for slaveholders than abolitionists. While some beheld in the abolition movement the very anti-democratic pretensions they had fled from, others perceived a more egregious corruption of their democratic rights. Abolitionists, they believed, abused freedom of expression to create division in society and impose their vision upon others. Many white southern-born Illinoisans feared the overthrow of majority and states’ rights in favor of a minority’s moral convictions.³⁷

Abolitionism also violated the moderate Unionist principles upon which, southern-born settlers believed, the Northwest had been founded. Thus, from the beginning of the convention debates in 1824 to the onset of Civil War, antislavery and anti-abolitionism existed in constant tension. Merton Dillon explains that despite the apparent lack of a “crusading drive against slavery” from 1824 to the mid 1830s, the issue never disappeared, because “[t]he nature of the population made that impossible.

³⁵ As Eli Lide further illustrated, Alabama Baptists formed a committee that denounced the foreign missionary Board, determined not to contribute any funds towards their missions, cancelled their magazine subscriptions, and considered the establishment of a separate Southern Board. Green, ed., *The Lides go South*, 32.

³⁶ Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery*, 36.

³⁷ Nicole Etcheson reiterates in *Emerging Midwest*, 112: “That Upland Southern Midwesterners abjured the abolitionist movement did not mean that they harbored any love for slavery.”

Many persons had come to Illinois even before 1854 specifically because they wished to escape from a slave society.” The anti-slavery societies of central Illinoisan counties proved this point. Morgan County’s society, founded to “promote the public good, by using all honorable means to prevent the introduction of slavery into this state,” also sought to uphold its principles without restricting the peoples’ democratic rights, and by “cherishing political harmony.” The Sangamon County Anti-Slavery Society adopted a surprisingly more radical position, hoping to “enlighten & rectify public sentiment on the subject of slavery & to convince our fellow citizens by arguments addressed to their understanding & consciences...” then further asserting “that the system of slavery is a great sin in the sight of God, & that the duty, safety & best interests of all concerned require its immediate abandonment.” The Constitution of the local Springfield Anti-Slavery Society chapter, an auxiliary to the Sangamon society, did not include that crucial phrase “immediate abandonment.”³⁸

While some southern-born settlers actively participated in such societies, many others avoided them despite their own private opposition to slavery. Preachers in Illinois seeking to establish antislavery congregations and members of their congregation frequently refer to the difficulties of navigating the peoples’ conflicted sentiments regarding slavery. One letter to the editor of the *Western Citizen* discussed the Chicago journal’s charge that Mr. Williams, a candidate for the ministry in Batavia, Illinois, did not consider it his duty and obligation to condemn slavery from the pulpit. The writer first described the charge as entirely false, since Williams had explicitly announced his own belief that slavery was a sin, and he held a duty to preach against it as such. After

³⁸ Dillon, “The Antislavery Movement in Illinois: 1824–1835,” 151; Morganian Society, Morgan Co., Ill.; Anti-slavery society constitution, Springfield, Ill., Sangamon County Anti Slavery Society, ALPL.

assuring the editor that the candidate was indeed against slavery and deserving the position based on his principled opposition to the institution, the anonymous citizen then went on to explain Illinoisans' need to accept those who were antislavery, but not necessarily abolitionist, into the religious and political community. "There are doubtless many candid persons whose feelings and views are opposed to slavery," he explained, "but whose minds are prejudiced against the movements and measures of abolitionists." Due to this indivisible association many Illinoisans made between abolitionism and radicalism, "[a]n impression perhaps has fastened itself on their minds unfavorable not only to the measures but to the motives of the leaders of the antislavery enterprise." The writer sought to correct the false claims printed in the *Western Citizen* in case such wary antislavery-leaning "persons were present during the transactions," since "the representation which you have given, though desired for good, would tend to confirm them in their prejudices and keep them from the antislavery ranks, because they would know it to be incorrect." By correcting this misleading portrait of an antislavery man, the journal could prevent the masses of those who held antislavery sentiment—but avoided asserting their convictions publicly—from turning away from antislavery principles altogether.³⁹

Reverend Albert Hale explained the root of this mentality to Asa Turner, a newly arrived immigrant on Illinois soil who aspired to preach for the Home Missionary Society there in 1838. Hale explained that many of the southern-born migrants had once been slaveholders, making it difficult to preach antislavery doctrines. "Every prospect of the final triumph of anti slavery principle makes them feel as did the chief priests under the first proclamation of the gospel, when they cried out—'you intend to bring that man's

³⁹ *Western Citizen*, n.d., ALPL.

blood upon us.” Feeling the oppressive weight of slavery laid upon them by morally inspired abolitionist activists, particularly those from the North who had never been burdened with the decision to free their slaves or retain the wealthy enterprise of slavery, many southerners rebuked the cause out of shame or spite.⁴⁰ Then, “[t]housands more who never owned slaves are desperately opposed to anti slavery movements—because their relatives hold slaves or have held them.” As John Regan corroborated, “the general convictions of the people are in favour of freedom to all,” yet there is “a large portion who...consider it a duty they owe to slaveholders, and to the integrity and peace of the Union, to let things remain as they are.” A difficult task, therefore, confronted any man attempting to preach the gospel of antislavery. “The truth is,” Reverend Hale advised Turner, “we need a man of peculiar qualifications,” capable of speaking to southern-born men who opposed slavery, without offending them or their relatives.⁴¹

Elihu Springer, a Methodist preacher born in Illinois, intimated that the actions and statements of abolitionists made even an antislavery devotee question the very cause he pursued. In 1838 he wrote, “I first became acquainted with Modern Abolitionists, And I must confess that such was the extent to which they went in their misrepresentations” of the Methodist Church “that it required all the grace that I could master to maintain my original Antislavery views.” On August 2, 1840, Springer recorded in his diary the usual

⁴⁰ Albert Hale to [Asa] Turner, Jan. 26, 1838, (Rev.) Albert Hale Papers, ALPL; James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 295, suggests the division between northerners and southerners over slavery stemmed less from a difference in sentiment than a difference in approach: “[e]ven Southerners who opposed slavery wearied of hearing abolitionists carp about it.”

⁴¹ The man whom Hale recommended for the position, Dr. Nelson, is presumably Rev. David Nelson, noted for playing a role in Elijah Lovejoy’s conversion to abolitionism, and for preaching antislavery doctrines that led him to escape mob violence in Missouri for the free soil of Quincy, located in west-central Illinois. Nelson had been born in Tennessee to Virginia-born parents. (Rev.) Albert Hale Papers, ALPL; John Edmiston Alexander, *Brief History of the Synod of Tennessee, from 1817 to 1887* (Philadelphia: MacCalla and Co., 1890), 112–114; Paul Simon, *Freedom’s Champion: Elijah Lovejoy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 56; John Regan, *The Emigrant’s Guide to the Western States of America, or, Backwoods and Prairies* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1852), 125.

occurrences in a preacher's life, with the exception that in Georgetown, he "went to hear a sermon from Wm Smith a Presbyterian minister. But to my utter disappointment & mortification what should I see upon the sacred desk but a lot of Abolition papers from which the Minister was making copious extracts & commentary at large." Springer angrily remarked that "instead of being fed by the wholesome truths of the gospel, the congregation were annoyed by hearing exaggerated accounts of southern slavery by those mad Abolition fanaticks still exaggerated by the speaker." Despite Springer's moral distress that in the United States "we find but one spot to darken & disgrace the scene. And O how dark it is! I refer to the accursed [sic] sin of slavery in existence amongst us," he perceived abolitionism as almost a greater evil than slavery itself. Though he decried "the great curse, & evil of Slavery," even this minister grew frustrated by the abolitionists, those "[p]oor erring m[e]n," so "prone to make good, evil & evil, good."⁴²

These observations indicated the power the mere hint of abolitionism had in stifling antislavery fervor in Illinois, as people grew to fear that antislavery too often led to radical abolitionism. When Kentuckian Ben Brink squared off in a debate against Missouri slaveholder Arkley Horner, who had travelled to the town of Ellisville, Illinois, just west of Peoria, to give speeches defending slavery, the whole town gathered to witness the spectacle. A simple but arduously antislavery farmer from a slave state, Brink countered Horner's claim that slavery was sanctioned by the Bible, and he distinguished slaveholding from other forms of servitude: "'What *is* slavery? It ain't holdin' a man as a servant, an' usin' him well...slavers separate families...forbid their niggers to learn readin' and writin'...larrup your niggers almost to death, or cut their ears, fingers, and toes off, as I've seen in Kentucky, whar the slavers are a mighty heap better men than any

⁴² Diary, 12–13, 54, 75–76, Elihu Springer Papers, ALPL.

in Missouri.... You steal men away out of their own country, and steal away free niggers in this country too—I've seen it.”⁴³ His sentiments echoed those expressed by Peter Cartwright, the Methodist “backwoods preacher” who challenged Lincoln for a congressional seat in 1846. Born in Virginia and raised in Kentucky, Cartwright worked for years to spread the Gospel and antislavery doctrines in the latter state. In his autobiography of 1856, Cartwright asserted that “Slavery is certainly a domestic, political and moral evil...you not only see the dreadful evils growing out of the system in the almost universal licentiousness which prevails among the slaves themselves, but their young masters are often tempted and seduced from the paths of virtue, from the associations in which they are placed.” Surprised at hearing Methodist preachers condoning the practice and outlawing the spread of the Gospel to slaves, he sorrowfully noted that “our preachers” in the slave states, “by marriage and other ways, became more and more entangled with this dark question, and were more and more disposed to palliate and justify the traffic and ownership of human beings.”⁴⁴

Believing it his especial duty to work for the eventual abolition of slavery, Cartwright nonetheless perceived abolitionism as the second most dangerous development, behind the rise of a proslavery religion, in preventing the antislavery movement from succeeding. Looking back upon his work in Kentucky, he remarked that he had served as “the agent or instrument of freeing scores of the poor slaves, and not only of their emancipation, but also of the colonization of many of them, returning them to their own country free and happy.” Due to a trend in the slave states to legislate against emancipation, however, Cartwright eventually found his antislavery goal—even when

⁴³ Regan, *The Emigrant's Guide*, 99, 149–50, 390.

⁴⁴ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1857), 128, 244.

approached slowly and carefully—impossible to achieve. “These stringent laws of the legislatures of slave states,” he claims, “were passed chiefly from two causes: first, their inherent love of oppression; and, second, from the extreme and violent manner of intermeddling with the legal rights of slaveholders in the South by rabid abolitionists of the North.” Meanwhile, he lamented, slavery becomes ever more entrenched in southern society.⁴⁵

Cartwright’s desire to “get entirely clear of the evil of slavery,” his fear that his “young and growing family of children...might marry into slave families,” and his increasing impotence in working against the system of slavery in Kentucky, spurred him to move his family to Sangamon County in 1824. There, however, his anti-abolitionist stance remained just as strong as his moral repugnance toward slavery. “I have never seen a rabid abolition or free-soil society that I could join,” he claimed in 1856, “because they resort to unjustifiable agitation, and the means they employ are generally, unchristian. They condemn and confound the innocent with the guilty; the means they employ are not truthful, at all times; and I am perfectly satisfied that if force is resorted to, this glorious Union will be dissolved, a civil war will follow, death and carnage will ensue, and the only free nation on the earth will be destroyed.” Though he had always actively opposed slavery, “I did not meddle with it politically...I felt it my duty to bear my testimony against the moral wrong of slavery.” Cartwright did not appear to make antislavery doctrines a central tenet of his political career; yet, he did serve two terms as a

⁴⁵ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 419–20.

member of the Illinois General Assembly and made his unsuccessful run for Congress as the Democratic candidate against Lincoln in 1846.⁴⁶

The stigma of abolitionism consistently detracted from any efforts made by antislavery individuals and groups in Illinois from 1825 to 1850. Abolitionism, the desire to immediately abolish slavery, was vehemently denounced by most southern-born migrants to Illinois. At times, men drew upon the violence or vigilantism of southern or frontier culture to combat it, even going to such lengths as murdering professed leaders of abolition. The doctrine of antislavery, however, offended them not at all, as long as it asserted its dogma without placing blame on southerners or the South for slavery and thereby denigrating their forebears and friends for the evils of an entire institution. Thus, not two but three positions on the slavery issue coexisted in the United States until the Civil War: “There were radical abolitionists who opposed slavery on moral grounds,” and “proslavery citizenry, who contrived various economic and social justifications for its continuation and growth.” Then “between those two extremes were many others who advanced more qualified arguments.” Settlers in Illinois despised the lack of opportunities they believe slavery societies gave them, and they also “wanted no African-Americans in their midst.”⁴⁷

While the root of these anti-abolitionist and anti-black expressions stemmed from the anti-slave system ideology southerners embodied, they were also a consequence of

⁴⁶ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 144–45, 129, 169–70. To Cartwright’s comments Nicole Etcheson adds those of James G. Birney, who left Kentucky due to the ““corrupting influence of slavery on the character of the *young*... especially those of our sex—and six of my seven children are boys.”” Etcheson, *Emerging Midwest*, 112; see also White, Jr., *A. Lincoln*, 134–35.

⁴⁷ Etcheson, *Emerging Midwest*, 30, 110–114; Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 113. Luke Harlow’s study notes a very similar attitude among Kentuckians who tread a fine line of antislavery, and took great care to refrain from blaming fellow southern slaveholders for the institution. Harlow, “From Border South to Solid South: Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830—1880” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2009), 35.

the arduous process of forming a new northwestern identity. Immediately after Illinoisans had decided against holding a convention in 1824, they together embraced a new future as free state residents in the Northwest, particularly in the central region of the state in which Lincoln resided. Here, the intermixture and mingling of immigrants from different regions resulted in a melting pot of cultures. Power's early historical record usefully, though incompletely, provides some indication of this admixture in Lincoln's adopted county of Sangamon and city of Springfield. Though the 670 southerners composed a majority of Power's 999 documented native white settlers, a significant majority, 339, arrived from New England and the Mid-Atlantic free states.⁴⁸

Historian Douglas K. Meyer has more recently remarked on the prevalence of southern migrants and intermingling of northerners and southerners in central Illinois. Drawing on census records to more accurately analyze each county of Illinois, he provides a series of maps depicting the relative dominance of immigrant groups in each. Grouping the migrants by region of birth, Meyer creates the several categories: Midland-Midwest, Upland South, New England, and Foreign-born to determine the distribution of Illinoisan settlers by birthplace. According to these categories, upland southerners formed the dominant migrant group in the area of Illinois where Lincoln lived. More importantly, however, "the northward thrust of an Upland South impress and the southward thrust of a New England impress in Illinois were actually greater and more complex than previously posited." Despite the prevalence of Kentuckians, Tennesseans, and Virginians in central Illinois, "a quintessential cultural mixing zone formed that included Upland Southerners, Yankees and Europeans" in many counties, including Sangamon.⁴⁹ Settlement in

⁴⁸ Power, *History of the Early Settlers*, *passim*.

⁴⁹ Meyer, *Making the Heartland Quilt*, 294, fig. 10.5, and 295.

Sangamon and other counties in central Illinois stand apart from the rest, due to the absence of any “core” group of settlers from one single region. Rather than being dominated by any one of the regions Meyer lists, Sangamon County was settled by large numbers of migrants from both the mid-Atlantic region and the South, as well as a secondary but significant number of settlers from New England. The influx of many more foreign-born migrants during the 1850s boosted that section of the population on the eve of the Civil War, further contributing to the variegated culture of the county.⁵⁰

Because Lincoln’s county never attracted an overwhelming number of migrants from one particular region, a unique cultural heterogeneity prevented the immigrants of one particular state or region from imposing their cultural norms or traditions on the others. This varied and variable mix of people, societies, and cultures prompted the formation of a northwestern identity very early in Illinois statehood and ensured that central Illinoisans would temper the more extreme positions of northern and southern Illinois. By the time Lincoln had arrived in 1831, northern- and southern-born migrants in central Illinois had already begun this process of building a shared political identity. Lincoln and other southerners lived beside northern and northwestern neighbors with whom they attended school, church services, and political meetings. In a particular sense, Lincoln already embodied all these cultures in 1831. Though born a Kentuckian, his family had for generations “followed well-worn trails from New England through the Upper South and on westward into the Ohio Country.” Thus, when Lincoln decided to settle alone in New Salem at the age of 22, he “inherited an ancestry that prepared him fully for the cultural ambiguity that awaited him on the prairies of Illinois.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ See footnotes 113 and 120 for figures and data drawn from Meyer, *Making the Heartland Quilt*.

⁵¹ Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 9.

Although from the very beginning, the anti-slave system ideology of southern-born Illinois migrants created a distance between them and southerners who remained in the South, that distance became significantly greater over this period, especially in central Illinois. As Henry Clyde Hubbart points out, “southern born men and women living in the free West in the forties and fifties could not be called southerners,”⁵² even if the very men and women who engaged in this process, often could not or would not realize just how similar they had become to their fellow migrants from different regions. Too often, this simple fact is obscured behind the rhetoric and reactions of northerners. When southern migrants arrived in Illinois and met with New Englanders and other northern-born settlers, the differences between the two cultures often resulted in disputes, accusations, and mischaracterizations built upon former prejudice or perceived inferiority. Richard Lyle Power places particular influence on the role of northerners in fomenting disagreements, referring to their movements out West as an attempt at “cultural imperialism.” Believing themselves superior to southerners, New Englanders sought either to form isolated communities away from their corrupt influences, or to reform their new neighbors. John Mack Faragher and Nicole Etcheson provide numerous examples of both northerners and southerners making deprecating comments about each other’s habits and customs, ranging from cooking methods to religious morals.⁵³

These statements often make it appear as though northerners and southerners remained permanently divided in their new home state of Illinois. However, when given more attention and placed within the context of Illinois politics, the evidence points to the

⁵² Henry Clyde Hubbart, “‘Pro-Southern’ Influences in the Free West,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 20 (June 1993): 46.

⁵³ Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture*, *passim*; Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 45–46; Etcheson, “North and South in the Midwest” in *The Emerging Midwest*.

contrary. Western culture did not mask sectional differences in central Illinois; rather, the accusations and vitriol created an escalating political discourse that often blinds us, as historians, to the very real commonalities these particular westerners shared despite their differences. Nicole Etcheson's assertion that "the sectional crisis strengthened Westernness by forcing Upland Southerners in the Midwest to search for the middle ground that lay between the extremes of abolitionism and secession" particularly applies to the region of central Illinois Lincoln knew so well. Meanwhile, her contention that during the 1850s upland southerners' "own sense of Southernness was reinvigorated, weakening the bond with other settlement groups," more accurately applies to areas of southern Illinois where Lincoln spent much less time.⁵⁴

These families, when they placed roots in Illinois's free soil, changed. The southerners whom Lincoln came to know began negotiating a new political culture with northerners from the very beginning. Encountering migrants from the North, these "mutating cultures blended, and then frontier conditions changed the hybrids."⁵⁵ The formation of "Old Settlers" associations across Illinois and other parts of the Northwest just prior to the Civil War indicated the significance that settlers, themselves, attributed to early events in creating a combined northwestern identity. While these associations became much more widespread and effectively organized after the Civil War, a few initially formed in the 1850s, when the sectional crisis threatened to break apart the nation. The associations, in the 1850s and afterwards, often recorded tales of two notable events in Illinois's early history: the "deep snow" of 1830–31 and the Black Hawk War.

⁵⁴ Etcheson, *Emerging Midwest*, 108.

⁵⁵ As James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 189, asserts, "migration filtered southern culture, making the Illinois strains different from home cultures in the South, so that southern cultures in Illinois were not simply transplants."

When Sangamon County residents formed an “Old Settlers’ Society” in June 1859, they cited settlement prior to the deep snow as a necessary qualification for entrance into the society, and they highlighted the efforts of early settlers in creating the county.

Lincoln missed the deep snow, arriving in New Salem in July 1831, at the young age of twenty-two. He did participate, however, in a second event often noted by old settlers associations in their records of early settlement: the Black Hawk War. By granting significance to these early post-convention events in Illinois’s history, settlers engaged in a shared heritage with their fellow neighbors who had come from different regions, cultures, and backgrounds to form one single society in the Northwest. The Black Hawk War, especially, had spurred settlers to gather arms together against Native Americans that threatened their claims to the land. As a letter from Rushville, dated June 20, 1831, and published in the *Illinois Advocate* explained, “[t]he prompt manner in which the call of the Governor [for troops] has been met in this instance, and the facility with which the supplies were obtained, shows that Illinois is quite able to defend herself...and that she is no longer in a state of supplicant minority. The counties of Sangamon and Morgan, alone, are able to raise and support an army sufficient to punish the Indians near our northern frontier.” Men from all sections of the country had gathered to fight a common enemy, and officers from the 2nd Regiment, which was composed by Sangamon County volunteers, hailed from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and Kentucky.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 43. “These counties have now 850 men in the expedition, and 400 more volunteers stand ready in Sangamon county, to march at a moment’s warning.” Ellen M. Whitney, comp., *The Black Hawk War, 1831–1832 II, Letters and Papers*, Part I (Springfield, Ill.: Illinois State Historical Library, 1973), 65, and 64–68 n34,7,8,9.

These early events about which the oldest settlers reminisced worked to create a more unified political culture in central Illinois, which very soon became a point of pride among citizens of the Northwest, who claimed to “shed the habits and prejudices of their natal states.”⁵⁷ When migrants posted in the *Boston Patriot* a notice that they would be leaving for Illinois as a group in 1834, the *Illinois Advocate and State Register* responded that they welcomed any settlers who wished to embrace Illinois culture. However, the newspaper also issued a strong warning to those “so strongly imbued with the peculiar manners, notions and ways of thought of that home, as to be unable to shake them off and adopt those of his adopted country,” and advised these men to remain in their native region.⁵⁸ Due to this identification of northwestern culture with truly American values, Illinoisans attached pride to national political candidates who hailed from the West, regardless of party, such as Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay. Many of the upland southerners, especially Kentuckians, in Lincoln’s region voted Whig beginning in the mid-1830s. Even though his New Salem neighbors supported Jackson and would often vote Democrat, overall “the Sangamon country voted Whig, just like that great center of Whiggism, the Bluegrass of Kentucky,” The focus of Whig doctrines on a western conception of Unionism attracted many central Illinoisans from Kentucky to that platform.⁵⁹ As Ayers et al. explain, “Westerners...portrayed themselves as quintessential *Americans*, and their ‘section’ as a place where sectional distinctions were resolved and

⁵⁷ Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 27.

⁵⁸ R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest. Pioneer Period, 1815–1840*, II (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1951), 104.

⁵⁹ Due to a combination of national politics and frequent in-migration of new residents, “Illinois politics between 1830 and 1835 were in chaos. No longer was it possible to explain things on the basis of the two-faction division of the 1820s. Instead numerous cliques existed, most of whose leaders professed allegiance to Jackson, but who felt in no way bound to support his measures.” Buley, *The Old Northwest*, II: 187; Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 126.

transcended. In this self-congratulatory rhetoric, sectional identity merged with a vaulting sense of the nation's glorious future and a patriotic devotion to the union."⁶⁰

"The high point of this political identification with rural values," Malcolm Rohrbough explains, "was the presidential election of 1840, when the 'hard cider and log cabin' campaign that William Henry Harrison rode to the White House demonstrated that the values of the Old Northwest had become the values of the nation."⁶¹ This attention to a national culture created in the Northwest greatly affected Lincoln's own political thought and, as one historian has argued, his attachment to the concept of "a 'perpetual union' that transcended regional differences under the aegis of a strong national government" actually derived from "undercurrents of regionalism...that helped shape both his nationalism and his commitment to anti-slavery as a transcendent national ideal." As Lincoln developed into a prominent political figure in central Illinois, he exuded the very values of antislavery and Union he had learned as a northwestern migrant.

Though they may have maintained southern manners and traditions in their everyday way of life, southern families worked with other migrants, whether implicitly or explicitly, to create a northwestern political culture built, in part, from a common set of ideals centered on both Unionist principles and antipathy to the system of slavery. By 1860 most southern-born and southern-descended Illinoisans living in central Illinois participated in this distinctly different political culture that increased the geographical divide separating them from their forbears, friends, and families in the South. This northwestern process not only shaped the future president's own position on crucial

⁶⁰ Edward L. Ayers, et al., *All Over the Map*, 27.

⁶¹ Rohrbough, *Pathways to the Old Northwest*, 84.

issues but also imbued him with a particular set of assumptions regarding the fellow southerners residing in his midst.

There forever remained a political divide among Illinoisans, however, extending directly from the issues of 1824. In 1824, the convention had most clearly divided what would become central Illinois from southern Illinois. Lincoln had not witnessed the events of the 1820s and had little sense of the opinions, issues, and happenings of the state as the convention debate raged. However, the vote count of Sangamon County inhabitants provides some indication of the sentiments enveloping the region in which Lincoln resided for so long. Though largely composed of settlers of southern descent in 1824, residents cast 722 votes against the convention and a meager 153 in its favor.⁶² When word reached them of the statewide vote count, these Sangamon settlers cheered in honor of the Northwest Ordinance, alternatively toasting “‘The Tree of Liberty, planted by the Ordinance of 1787...May Illinois never cut it down,’” and “‘the Ordinance of ’87—Illinois has pledged her faith to support it.’”⁶³ As Peter Onuf has described, the Northwest Ordinance became to many Illinoisans an almost mythical provision handed down by the Founding Fathers. It had stood the test of American democracy in 1824 and now, through the will of the people, served as a foundation of government in the Northwest. In the 1850s, when former governor Edward Coles recalled Illinois’s early statehood, he “sketched the history of the ‘marvellous’ Ordinance which had preserved

⁶² The convention voting results depict southern Illinoisans casting far more votes in favor of convention than central and south-central Illinoisans, though both arrived largely from slave states. This vote count also mirrored the 1822 Governor’s Election, in which Edward Coles proved the most popular choice in central and south-central Illinois, but not in southern Illinois. Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*, 27, Fig. 1; Angle, “*Here I Have Lived*,” 29–30.

⁶³ Angle, “*Here I Have Lived*,” 29; Onuf, *Statehood and Union*, 130, 152.

freedom in the states north of the Ohio River,” and “had won more popular sanction than the Constitution.”⁶⁴

This providential reading of the founding document of the Northwest territory, however, did not extend to all new members of the state. In local and state politics, there existed a barrier between those who emphasized the power of the Northwest Ordinance in securing the state’s freedom from slavery, and those who lauded her democratic sovereignty as a state—one that always was, and continued to be, equal in power and independence to every single other state of the Union. One writer to the Illinois *Intelligencer*, one of the major newspapers in early Illinois statehood, had argued against the comments of a local anti-convention leader written in the Edwardsville *Spectator*. “Pro Bono Publico” opposed the leader’s use of Thomas Jefferson to justify voting against a convention, lamenting having to witness “the name of our venerable statesman in such company...I am sure that if the old gentleman were near, he would expostulate against having any part of his valuable works made subservient to the support of principles so hideous as those protected by the *few* in the legislature, and I seriously hope that his name will never again be taken in vain.” Invoking Jefferson proved a common tactic on both sides of the convention debate, as Illinoisans discussed the rights of their state in relation to the Northwest Ordinance. Many like “Pro Bono” wielded Jefferson’s conviction that “a preceding generation cannot bind a succeeding generation,” and thus the state could not be limited by the Ordinance of 1787.⁶⁵ “Truth” likened the transition of Illinois Territory into a state to the maturation of a young man’s relationship with his father. Just as the youth asked “his father at the age of eighteen, for privilege to go and

⁶⁴ Davis, “The Significance of Excluding Slavery from the Old Northwest,” 87.

⁶⁵ Illinois *Intelligencer*, May 17, 1823; Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*, 88.

provide for and govern himself,” so too did Congress grant to Illinois “the privilege to alter or amend” their constitution “whenever it might be deemed proper.” As the *Illinois Gazette* reminded its readers, “it must always be borne in mind, that, with regard to the United States, we stand, and have stood, from the moment of our admission into the Union, *upon an equal footing with the original states*.”⁶⁶

Others, however, asserted that “[t]hose who settled in the Illinois before it became a state, saw the ordinance of 1787, and they chose their residence under the constitution that slavery *could not be introduced*.” That “solemn pledge” had secured Illinois the clear benefits of free territory, which could already be seen if one only cared to look “at all the states which have emancipated themselves, and compare them with the slave states. Here are experiments on a large scale, so decisive and so uniform in their result *against* slavery, that if it were an affair of simple calculation, a question merely of political arithmetic, common sense would teach us to reject it.”⁶⁷

This split between those who trumpeted Illinois’s state sovereignty first and foremost, and those who believed the Ordinance of 1787 crucial and necessary to preserving the state against slavery, persisted as an undercurrent in the political culture of antebellum Illinois. With the sectionalization of American politics in the 1850s, the popular sovereignty portion of the Democratic Party united around the more developed creed of popular sovereignty, while the Republican Party adopted the extension of the Northwest Ordinance as their party’s pledge. Therefore, as Coles, Lincoln, and other citizens praised the Ordinance of 1787 as the single barrier between slavery and freedom in their state’s early history, Douglas and his Democrats instead trumpeted popular

⁶⁶ *Illinois Intelligencer*, May 24, 1823; *Illinois Gazette*, in the *Illinois Intelligencer*, July 5, 1823.

⁶⁷ *Illinois Intelligencer*, Jan. 18, 1823.

sovereignty as the agent of freedom, pointing to the votes cast against the convention as proof that the people—not the Founders or U.S. Congress—had decided Illinois’s fate. In his speech on the compromise resolutions of 1850, Douglas alleged that “notwithstanding the ordinance of 1787, the Missouri compromise, and all the kindred measures, under whatever name,” enacted in the halls of the U.S. capital, “all the new States which have been admitted into the Union, with clauses in their constitutions prohibiting slavery, became free States by virtue of their own choice, and not in obedience to any congressional dictation.” Freedom in Illinois and the rest of the Northwest had been assured by the early settlers, who would not have “tolerated the institution of slavery within its limits, even if it had been peremptorily required to have done so by an act of Congress.” To claim that these settlers had been proslavery and had suffered the suppression of their democratic right to choose the state’s fate, Douglas declared, “is a libel upon the character of those people...I will never blacken the character of my own State by such an admission.” The decision early settlers made to prevent a convention had not, itself, stifled freedom—it had secured it. The vote had upheld the right of the people—not Congress or the Founders—to decide Illinois’s future.⁶⁸

The idea of popular sovereignty as an avenue to democratic freedom would never captivate Lincoln. He and many of his constituents held the nationally legislated Northwest Ordinance of 1787 responsible for assuring that Illinois became a free soil state. Though Lincoln well knew and understood the anti-slave system mentality around him—southerners’ anti-black attitudes, disgust with abolitionism, and their social

⁶⁸ Suzanne Cooper Guasco links the convention debate to 1850s Illinois politics, connecting Illinoisans’ arguments concerning slavery and freedom to Republicans’ free labor appeals to nonslaveholders. Guasco, “‘The Deadly Influence of Negro Capitalists’: Southern Yeomen and Resistance to the Expansion of Slavery in Illinois,” *Civil War History* 47 (2001): 7–29; *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., March 13–14, 1850, 364–75.

antipathy to slavery—he would never understand popular sovereignty as anything more than a misguided doctrine that deceived Americans into believing they could painlessly halt the spread of slavery. Regardless of this distance between them, the ideology of southern-born popular sovereignty advocates further imbued in Lincoln the conviction that white southern nonslaveholders opposed the institution of slavery. In the state legislature, he would repeatedly face these issues of slavery and democracy and become better acquainted with the positions of southern-born representatives and their constituents in Illinois.

Chapter Three

Lincoln and Illinois, 1831–1847

From his 1831 arrival in New Salem, Illinois, to his entrance into national politics in 1847, Abraham Lincoln developed from a Kentucky-born adolescent into the 30th Congress's "Lone Whig Star of Illinois." During these crucial preparatory years before serving as a congressman, he immersed himself in the political culture of central Illinois. Working as a surveyor, postmaster, storekeeper, and circuit court rider exposed him to the views of his fellow migrants. Most importantly, his terms in the state legislature during a period in which mob violence and sectional bickering over slavery often rose to the surface, taught him that extremes must be met with moderation and thoughtful policy. Lincoln's association with Illinois constituents and legislators, familiarity with communications from southern states, and yet few experiences actually visiting the South, all contributed both to his sense that slavery was "bad policy" and to his understanding of Illinois and southern opinions on slavery. From this large set of experiences, Lincoln learned about the anti-slave system views of his neighbors and constituents; the views of southern states on slavery and on its relation to the free and slave states; and, most importantly, that his own position on slavery differed from that of most fellow Illinoisans. As a northwesterner with roots in the slaveholding states of Virginia and Kentucky, Lincoln largely reflected the position held by many of his fellow southern migrants regarding abolitionism, but he emphasized the "injustice" or immorality of slavery in a way that few publicly acceded to and always upheld Congress's right to restrict slavery in the territories. Since Lincoln learned that most Illinoisans disagreed with him on these two points in the state legislature, from his

vantage point, most Illinoisans (certainly those born in the South) held much in common with their brethren who remained in the slave states.

When Lincoln travelled to New Salem, in central Illinois, he left behind his own family and an almost certain future in agriculture for the alternative opportunities of a burgeoning town. For six years he lived and worked in New Salem, first as a storekeeper, then as a surveyor and postmaster.¹ Entering the New Salem community brought Lincoln into direct contact with both northern- and southern-born migrants, and his work as a storekeeper facilitated his engagement with families, whether “old settlers” or new residents. In this profession, as in his subsequent occupations, Lincoln was surrounded by fellow southerners. Of the nine merchants who remained in central Illinois for an extended number of years, six arrived from the southern states of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. As a merchant, then as a postmaster from 1833 to 1836, Lincoln enjoyed a unique opportunity to, as Kenneth Winkle explains, “become acquainted with virtually every resident in the neighborhood.” With access to newspapers from all over the country, he became apprised of a variety of opinions, but he also came into direct contact with the multitude of settlers who reached Illinois from the North and South. Meanwhile, his work as a surveyor and, later, as a lawyer in the Eighth Judicial Circuit brought him greater contact with the people of central Illinois beyond his small circle in New Salem and Springfield.²

Lincoln’s work as both surveyor and, later, lawyer in the Eighth Judicial Circuit, also brought him into extensive contact with the people of central Illinois who resided beyond New Salem and Springfield. Riding the circuit for weeks each Spring and Fall,

¹ Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 122; Donald, *Lincoln*, 40, 51.

² Lincoln served as postmaster in New Salem from May 1833 to May 1836. Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 101–02, 113; *CW*, I: 25.

Lincoln covered Sangamon and seven other counties, encountering a variety of northern-, southern- and foreign-born migrants and boarding in their homes. He befriended Sangamon County's surveyor John Calhoun, a Democrat and distant relative to John C. Calhoun, as well as John Todd Stuart, a Kentuckian married to Robert S. Todd's sister, with whom Lincoln roomed and served as junior law partner. Stuart served in the Illinois state legislature with Lincoln as one of the "Long Nine" members, named for their height, representing Sangamon County, and the two joined in a partnership in law when Lincoln moved to Springfield in 1837.³ Although southern-born migrants no longer constituted a majority of settlers after 1840, those who remained seem to have exercised an undue influence in the area in proportion to their numbers. As a surveyor during this 1830s period of high southern migration, Lincoln must have been acutely aware of their exodus from the South. Though he often colluded with northerners as well as southerners, Lincoln's closest friends, like Joshua Fry Speed, were often southerners, and the number of southerners with whom Lincoln chose to live, work, and spend time provides some indication that he trusted and understood southern members of the central Illinois community. His remark to fellow Kentuckian John T. Stuart in December 1839 that a "d—d hawk billed yankee is here, besetting me at every turn I take" for an outstanding debt he still owed provides some indication of Lincoln's natural ease around fellow southern-born northwesterners.⁴ In another instance, while in the midst of a legal battle on behalf of a widow, Lincoln "put the question to every reflecting man" whether or not they believed "Benjamin Talbott, Charles R. Matheny, William Butler and Stephen T. Logan, all sustaining high and spotless characters," were trustworthy men in vouching for

³ Donald, *Lincoln*, 104; Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 113, 120, 161, 170; Angle, "*Here I Have Lived*," 23.

⁴ *CW*, I: 158.

Lincoln's character. All four were southerners—two from Virginia and two from Kentucky. Lincoln knew them well, and each played a prominent role in Sangamon County government.⁵

Lincoln's efforts to gather support for Whig candidate William Henry Harrison in 1840 brought him into frequent contact with the many southerners from Kentucky, Virginia, and other slave states residing in his district.⁶ In a March 1840 letter to Kentuckian John T. Stuart, Lincoln listed some of the southerners with whom he conversed, including Kentuckians Thomas Hunter, Greenbury Smith, Solomon Miller, Samuel Harper, and William Fagan and his two sons, as well as Virginian John Cartmel. These formerly Van Buren men had decided to vote for Harrison in 1840. The rest of the list also reveals the geographical diversity that surrounded Lincoln in central Illinois. While he interacted with these several southerners, he also spoke with northerners from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. The geographical diversity he encountered living and working in the region, furthermore, reflected the composition of the state legislature. The 1850 census reveals that the state legislators who served during Lincoln's terms arrived from Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, with lesser numbers from Maryland, New York and New England. Citing their experiences "in another State [Kentucky]," where they had witnessed the "fearful consequences" of reorganizing the state's judicial system, the Whigs registered a protest against Illinois's attempts at reorganization. All of the signers had either been born in Kentucky, or had migrated to that state before coming to Illinois.⁷

⁵ Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 159, 166; *CW*, I: 95, 158.

⁶ Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 171, highlights this crucial period when Lincoln was working as a lawyer and politician, writing for the *Sangamo Journal*, and campaigning for William Henry Harrison.

⁷ *CW*, I: 184, 206, 201–03, 244–49.

Lincoln's involvement in state politics took place within this context of vast immigration of both northerners and southerners to Illinois. His political activities began soon after he arrived in New Salem and only expanded as he served as a state legislator. His unsuccessful run in 1832 demonstrated his strength as a candidate who understood his constituents and knew how to cross the partisan and sectional lines that divided Illinois migrants. Gaining 277 of the 300 votes cast in New Salem, Lincoln won the approval of most Democrats and Whigs, southerners and northerners, who knew him. In 1834 he captured 64 percent of Sangamon County's vote, gaining the crucial support of eminent Springfield Whigs, many of whom had relocated from Kentucky. When the ambitious young settler arrived in Vandalia, Illinois, in 1835 to serve in the General Assembly, he fit squarely within a state legislature that simply magnified the geographical distinctions of Illinois migrants Lincoln had encountered in central Illinois. While the southern section remained comprised of mostly southerners, northern Illinois had begun to attract more migrants from the Northeast.⁸ A list of all the members of the Illinois General Assembly in 1846 and 1847 provides a strong indication of the composition of northerners and southerners who likely existed throughout Lincoln's terms, with perhaps a greater number of southerners serving during Lincoln's years in the legislature.⁹ Of the 122 members serving in 1846, 55 were from slaveholding states, the majority of whom came from Kentucky. New York's 15 members represented the largest delegation of northeasterners, which totaled 43. Also serving were 16 northwesterners from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, 1 Washington, D.C. migrant, and 7 foreign-born

⁸ Soon after he arrived in New Salem in July 1831, Lincoln voted in the local New Salem elections. Thomas, *Lincoln's New Salem*, 61; Donald, *Lincoln*, 46; Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 115.

⁹ According to Michael Burlingame, in the years Lincoln served, as many as three-fourths of the legislators were southern-born. Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, Vol. 1, 92.

legislators.¹⁰ The “Long Nine”—the delegation of legislators that served Sangamon County in the 1830s—was composed of 7 southerners and 2 northerners, with Abraham Lincoln, John Todd Stuart, and William Fletcher Elkin all hailing from Kentucky.¹¹

The vast majority of bills and proposals discussed in the Illinois General Assembly from 1835 to 1842 did not directly involve slavery or sectionalism but instead focused on state banks, internal improvements, and the reorganization of counties as the state grew at an incredible rate.¹² Aware of this rapid growth, members sought the improvement of navigable streams and rivers and the building of roads and railroads to foster migration and trade. From late 1836 to 1838, however, Lincoln and the legislature were forced to confront slavery-related issues. Since the rise of antislavery and abolitionism following William Lloyd Garrison’s publication of the *Liberator* in 1831, the South had become increasingly anxious about the future security of its peculiar institution. After the abolitionist mails controversy of 1835, in which northern abolitionists had sent thousands of antislavery tracts to South Carolina through the postal system, southern post offices began suppressing abolitionist pamphlets. Southern legislatures, incensed by this self-perceived invasion of their rights and the additional responsibilities it imposed on them, sent memorials to northern legislatures calling for them to take action against abolitionism.¹³ These resolutions, filled with fear that southerners could not protect their slave system from abolitionist and insurrectionist

¹⁰ The second-largest contingent of southerners were Virginians, with 13 serving in the 15th General Assembly. E. Rust, *List of the Members Composing the Fifteenth General Assembly of the State of Illinois, Session of 1846-1847* (1846), Illinois State Library, ida.illinois.org, accessed November 17, 2012.

¹¹ Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 189-90; Mrs. Mabel Riddle Carlock, comp., *Wills and Family Histories* (Champaign, Ill.: Illinois Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1940), 150-59.

¹² “The greatest need of central Illinois was adequate transportation. The soil was rich, but it was difficult to get crops to market.” Thomas, *Lincoln’s New Salem*, 15.

¹³ Richard Lawrence Miller, *Lincoln and His World: Prairie Politician, 1834–1842* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 138–39.

threats, and with defensive resentment against the self-righteousness of antislavery northerners, arrived in Illinois in 1836.¹⁴ After receiving these reports, Illinois Governor Joseph Duncan passed them on to the Tenth General Assembly of the State of Illinois at the beginning of their session in December 1836. The reports and resolutions from Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Virginia, all written in the early months of 1836, were then referred to a joint select committee of seven House and four Senate members of the General Assembly.¹⁵ The documents depict southern legislators' fears that the rise of abolitionism in the free states would bring devastation to the South. The four sets of preambles and resolutions focused on free speech, the rights of individual states within the Union, the relationship between the free and slave states, and appropriate responses to abolitionism. From them, Lincoln and his fellow Illinoisans learned the viewpoints of southern legislators on the slavery issue in the mid-1830s.¹⁶

The language and arguments employed by these southerners is of particular significance. Firstly, the petitioners addressed the free states as members of the same family. Alabama's preamble explained that the state "approach[es] your honorable bodies with that confidence and good will which should characterize sisters of the family." Virginia's fourth resolution acknowledged the efforts of northern states in condemning radicalism and noted the "common dangers, sufferings and triumphs, which ought to bind us together in fraternal concord." This common bond bestowed upon them a responsibility to protect one another from radicals. The committee that drew up

¹⁴ Donald, *Lincoln*, 63; Carl Lawrence Paulus, "The Slaveholding Crisis: The Fear of Insurrection, The Wilmot Proviso, and the Southern Turn Against American Exceptionalism," (PhD diss., Rice University, 2012), 189–90.

¹⁵ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Tenth General Assembly of the State of Illinois* (Vandalia, Ill.: William Walters, 1837), 135, 148.

¹⁶ Arvarh E. Strickland, "The Illinois Background of Lincoln's Attitude toward Slavery and the Negro," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56 (Autumn 1963): 480–81.

Kentucky's resolutions "have been gratified with the spirit which has characterized the numerous and respectable meetings of our Northern brethren upon this deeply interesting subject, and their emphatic denunciations of the plans of those misguided fanatics." Even Mississippi's legislators, who clearly separated the free and slave states into different entities and passed a separate resolution each for the resolutions' distribution to non-slaveholding and slaveholding states, invoked "the bonds of friendship...the spirit of a faithful neutrality, and...the solemn and mutual guarantees of our national compact."¹⁷

Despite these assurances of familial affection, the southern legislatures felt "that they would be violating the high trust reposed in them by the House, did they not in terms firm, yet respectful, admonish them of the certain and tremendous consequences which must attend this officious and dangerous interference with their domestic institutions." Abolitionism, all four statements explained, had quickly developed into a great threat to the South that required the direct action of northerners, among whom the movement had arisen, to put down. "The abolitionists are not numerous," the Alabama preamble explained, "but they are wealthy, ardent and talented. They have presses in the various parts of the Union, from which they issue millions of essays, pamphlets and pictures, and scatter them amongst our slave population, calculated to urge them to deluge our country in blood." Their destructive tactics, the writers asserted, "cannot be tolerated."¹⁸ Mississippians likewise "have witnessed with apprehension of the deepest solicitude, the propagation of principles and the projection of schemes, in the non-slave holding States

¹⁷ One of Kentucky's resolutions spoke exclusively to "her sister States, where domestic slavery exists," assuring them that the state of Kentucky would resist any interference with slavery by Congress, free states, or private combinations. *Alabama Resolutions on the Subject of Domestic Slavery, Virginia Resolutions on the Subject of Domestic Slavery, Mississippi Resolutions on the Subject of Domestic Slavery, Kentucky Resolutions on the Subject of Domestic Slavery* (1836), Lincoln and Lincoln-related Documents, Illinois State Archives, ida.illinois.org, accessed November 17, 2012.

¹⁸ *Kentucky Resolutions; Alabama Resolutions.*

of this Union, by persons and associations” that fell under the title of “Abolitionists,” which threatened the “rights, peace and domestic prosperity of this and others of the slave-holding States.” Kentucky provided a more detailed analysis of the problems abolitionism posed to the entire country, especially regarding the right to free speech. Their committee members had unsuccessfully attempted to gauge the extent of abolitionism in the free states. Though they failed to attain any real substantive empirical data, they had succeeded in learning the true intentions of abolitionists. “[T]heir object,” they found, “is to produce an entire abolition of slavery in the United States, by printing and circulating...tracts, pamphlets, almanacs and pictorial representations...to produce a spirit of discontent, insubordination, and perhaps, insurrection [sic] with the slave population of the country.” The Kentucky preamble lamented “that under the miserably perverted name of free discussion, these incendiaries will be permitted to scatter their firebrands...with no check but that which may be imposed by the feeble operation of public opinion.” Deeply committed to the freedom of speech protected by the Constitution, they perceived the actions of abolitionists as a violation of that freedom. “[F]reedom of the press is one thing—its licentiousness another,” they explained, and though “the constitution of the country guarantees to every citizen the right to publish and speak his opinion upon all subjects, it wisely fixed the limitation that he shall be responsible for the abuse of that privilege.” Circumscribing abolitionism within these limits, the Kentuckians admitted themselves “unable to conceive a grosser prostitution of the freedom of the press, than the effort of the abolitionists to stir up the population of eleven States of this Union to rebellion and bloodshed.”¹⁹

¹⁹ *Mississippi Resolutions; Kentucky Resolutions.*

Every single one of the four state legislatures—from Kentucky in the West, Virginia in the upper South, to Mississippi and Alabama in the lower South—believed free states had a duty to their southern sister states to pass laws penalizing abolitionist activities. Virginia, Mississippi, and Alabama all passed resolutions urging the free states to pass their own laws against abolitionism, while Kentucky’s legislators simply did “not entertain this hope” that northerners would ever take direct action against this form of radicalism. Instead, they simply stated their “unqualified reprobation” of abolitionist societies in the North, formed “for the purpose of circulating incendiary publications among the slaveholding States of the Union.” These actions were clearly “a violation of the original basis of the federal compact, and calculated to endanger the integrity of this Union.” Rather than requesting direct action by the free states, these Kentuckians simply stated their grievance then passed a second resolution assuring “our sister States, where domestic slavery exists,” that Kentucky would take all actions necessary to resist abolitionism.²⁰

The remaining three legislatures explicitly asked the free states “to adopt penal enactments, or such other measures as will effectually suppress all associations within their respective limits, purporting to be, or having the character of, abolition societies.” Virginia urged them to “make it highly penal to print, publish, or distribute, newspapers, pamphlets, or other publications, calculated or having a tendency to excite the slaves of the southern states to insurrection and revolt.”²¹ Mississippi also detailed the possible outlines such laws should take. Free state legislation would “suppress, and restrain” inhabitants “from associating, plotting or conspiring to undermine, disturb or abolish our

²⁰ *Alabama Resolutions; Virginia Resolutions; Mississippi Resolutions; Kentucky Resolutions.*

²¹ *Virginia Resolutions.*

institutions of domestic slavery, in any manner or by any means, and under any pretext whatever.” The legislators further suggested that the northern states prohibit their citizens from “writing, speaking, printing or publishing sentiments and opinion, expressive of advice or suggestion to the public or others, calculated in temper and spirit, to induce disaffection among our slaves.” Alabama hoped such laws would “finally put an end to the malignant deeds of the abolitionists, calculated to destroy our peace, and sever this Union.”²²

In all four of these communications to free state legislatures, southern politicians expressed, both explicitly and implicitly, their southern-oriented views on the slavery issue. Each vehemently denounced abolitionism as a vile movement springing up from the North, but none of them cast blame upon the entire North for it. Rather, they were careful to qualify that “a small portion of your population” have displayed a hostility “to the happiness and safety of our country,” and thus it “is not believed to have emanated from any settled intention of your citizens to do us an injury. The dark, deep and malignant design of the Abolitionists...have never for a moment alienated our affections from the great mass of your citizens—and we have believed and still believe—that when you were fully apprised of the evils which this unholy land of cowardly assassins was bringing upon us, you would extend your hands to avert the calamities, which must otherwise fall upon our citizens.” Virginia’s fourth resolution specifically highlighted “those expressions of public opinion of our northern brethren, favourable to the rights of the southern states.” All four states recognized that abolitionism had not taken hold of

²² *Mississippi Resolutions; Alabama Resolutions.*

“the great body of the people” of the North and instead remained a radical movement on the fringes of northern society.²³

Despite these reassurances from southerners that they continued to feel themselves in perfect accord with the vast majority of northerners, their resolutions firmly reminded the free states that slave states, alone, held the power to modify, abolish, or continue slavery. This conviction drove the southern legislatures to adamantly insist upon the exclusive right of southern states to determine their respective courses regarding slavery. “Slavery in the United States is local and sectional,” Alabamians explained. Since it now existed in the “southern and middle states,” only these entities had the “business to say so and remove it.” Any “intermeddling” from citizens of other states would only disrupt the tranquility of the Union. Kentucky defensively asserted that its people “hold themselves responsible to no earthly tribunal, but will refer their cause to Him alone.” Therefore, “so long as she remains a sovereign member of this confederacy,” Kentucky “can never permit *another State* to assail her local institutions, much less a combination of private individuals.” The committee specifically included a resolution reiterating its belief that Kentucky, alone, “has power to regulate and control the subject of domestic slavery as it exists within her territory.” Virginia’s resolutions reiterated the same sentiment and included an additional provision defending the right of any slaveholding state to pass laws preventing the printing and circulation of “incendiary” works within its boundaries.²⁴

Whereas Mississippi’s communication focused specifically on the activities of abolitionists and did not engage in additional slavery-based issues, those released by

²³ *Alabama Resolutions; Kentucky Resolutions; Virginia Resolutions.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Alabama, Kentucky, and Virginia also addressed the future of slavery in Washington, D.C., Kentucky and Virginia flatly rejected the constitutionality of any action Congress might take to abolish slavery in the district. Virginia emphatically stated that it “would regard any act of congress having for its object the abolition of slavery in the district of Columbia, or the territories of the United States, as affording just cause of alarm to the slaveholding state, and bringing the Union into imminent peril.” Alabama, alone, qualified its assertion, noting that any congressional action would be unconstitutional “unless [prompted] by the desire of its own citizens.” By including a resolution regarding slavery in the nation’s capital, the slave state legislatures informed their northern brethren that in any location where slavery existed, the residents of that area, alone, held the power to determine its future. Through these statements, southerners implicitly demanded that northerners understand their peculiar circumstances as slave state inhabitants. As the Alabama members explained, “We were born in a land of domestic slavery. Like our liberties it descended from our fathers.” Born into a world wherein slavery dominated, they insisted that any blame for its continued existence should not be placed upon them. “We were innocent of its introduction,” they asserted, and only “time and the wisdom of experience” could work to eliminate it in their state. Thus, they “utterly deny the right of the citizens of any other states to claim an interference” because the citizens of non-slaveholding states simply did not—could not—understand the system of slavery or how best to deal with it.²⁵

Alabama’s assertion that free state residents did not know how best to handle slavery-related issues must have captured the attention of the Illinois House of Representatives, which contained within it a large number of southern-born residents.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The above memorials of Virginia, Alabama and Mississippi, as well as rejoinders by New York and Connecticut, were all responded to by the Joint Select Committee formed by the two houses of the Illinois General Assembly. This committee released a detailed report on the issues of slavery and abolitionism, which ultimately passed both houses. In this document, they largely concurred in the sentiments expressed by their southern brethren, with the critical exception that they considered the passage of penal acts against abolitionism unnecessary. Their lengthy response belied sympathy for white southerners who, “by the misguided and incendiary movements of the abolitionists,” had reason to fear for the security of themselves and their institutions. The committee decided to “unanimously concur in the opinion that the purposes of the abolitionists are highly reprehensible, and that their ends, even if peaceably attained, would be productive of the most deleterious consequences to every portion of our Union.” Furthermore, the Illinoisans asserted, “We hold that the citizens of slave holding states are no more amenable for the existence of slavery, than are those of the non-slaveholding states. It was introduced by our common ancestry, and came from them to us with the inviolable charter of our liberty, as a part of our heritage.” Thus, North and South, slaveholder and non-slaveholder, all held equal responsibility for the existence of slavery in the Union. No more blame could be placed upon contemporary southerners than northerners. The Joint Select Committee assured southerners that the free states had no right to interfere with southern slavery, since the U.S. Constitution “guaranties to the States where it does exist, its continuance without interference.”²⁶

²⁶ Two of the five House members selected to serve on the House committee were from Kentucky—John A. McClernand and James H. Ralston—and John Crain hailed from Tennessee. The birthplaces of the remaining two, Edward Smith and William Moore, are uncertain. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Tenth General Assembly of the State of Illinois*, 241, 243–44.

Thus did the Illinois delegation convey in just a few explicit statements a complete understanding of, and agreement with, the resolutions and explanations released by southern legislators. Yet, in nearly two full pages of additional explanation, these northern- and southern-born Illinoisans separated themselves from the South by providing a denunciation of abolitionism that epitomized their unique northwestern perspective. Rather than criticizing abolitionist doctrines and activities for destroying slavery, they castigated abolitionism for perpetuating it. "Before their organization," the committee lamented, "changes were rapidly making in public opinion of a character the most favorable to the amelioration of the condition of the colored population....not only was their condition as slaves made far more tolerable than it had been, but the bosom of the Christian and Philanthropist dilated with increasing hope that the time was fast approaching, when by the resistless force of public opinion, operating through colonization societies, and with the assent of their present owners, they would be released from thralldom, and returned moral and religious, to their own benighted land." Essentially, their position rested on the conviction that abolitionism was impractical, inherently violent, and destructive to more expedient antislavery efforts. In their opinion, colonization constituted a far better alternative. Colonization "violated no public law, outraged no private right, appealed to no vulgar prejudice, excited no angry and malicious feelings." The colonizationists had begun slowly and silently, "winning their way upon public opinion." All the benefits colonization could have granted to slaves and slaveholders, black men and white men, North and South, they believed, had evaporated with the steady onset of abolitionism.

From the Illinois point of view, abolitionist societies were to be denounced not because they might destroy slavery, but because their radicalism turned so many others against the antislavery movement. This only “forged new irons for the black man” and “scattered the fire brands of discord and disunion among the different states of the confederacy.” Rather than achieving their publicly stated intentions of freeing the slaves and ridding the nation of its sectional cancer, abolitionists “aroused the turbulent passions of the monster mob.” They “have pertinaciously insisted on doctrines which if reduced to practice would deluge our common country in blood, rend the Union asunder, and bring desolation upon all that was won by the valor and hallowed by the blood of our fathers.”²⁷ Illinois’s proposed solution to the problem of abolitionism drew a clear distinction between the Northwest and the South. Though depicting themselves equally opposed to abolitionism, the committee members soundly rejected the proposition that laws should be erected to punish abolitionist activities. The best “corrective of these opinions” should not be sought in new laws but “at the bar of public opinion.” They confidently explained “that an overwhelming majority of our fellow citizens would spurn indignantly” radical abolitionist doctrines and, inspired by their “deep regard and affection for our brethren of the South,” would uphold the U.S. Constitution. Though Illinois would remain ever ready to “fly to their assistance” in times of trouble, “they deem a decided expression of public opinion all that is at this time demanded.” Considering legislative action against abolitionism both unnecessary and imprudent, the Illinois committee pledged its support for the southern state legislators but made no effort to legally restrict abolitionists’ rights.²⁸

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

The committee offered resolutions for consideration that reflected these assertions and also included an additional proposal: “That the General Government cannot abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, against the consent of the citizens of said District without a manifest breach of good faith.” When this particular resolution was discussed and an amendment proposed, Lincoln moved to amend the amendment, and add: ““Unless the people of the said District petition for the same.”” Though his adjustment reflected the wording of Alabama’s resolution, the House ultimately decided against Lincoln’s amendment and chose not to qualify their assertion that Congress simply did not have the power to legislate on slavery in the District of Columbia. Only the residents of that district, these northwesterners implied, held that power.²⁹

After the Illinois House had decided to pass this set of resolutions by a vote of seventy-seven to six, Lincoln, who had voted against, filed a protest with fellow Whig representative of Sangamon County, Dan Stone. In their brief statement, Stone and Lincoln agreed with their fellow Illinoisans that “the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils.” They also unequivocally accepted “that the Congress of the United States has no power, under the constitution, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the different States.” Where Stone and Lincoln differed from the rest of the House, however, was in their insistence that the institution of slavery, itself, be denounced as “founded on both injustice and bad policy” and in their assertion that “the Congress of the United States has the power, under the constitution, to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia,” if done so “at the request of the people of said

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 244, 309.

District.”³⁰ Though Lincoln’s stand very briefly and pointedly explicated a relatively minor difference of opinion between him and his colleagues, this short statement became of some importance to him by 1860, when as the Republican presidential nominee he pointed to his protest as the clearest definition of his views on slavery.³¹

This clearly delineated difference between Lincoln and the vast majority of Illinois representatives reveals his position within central Illinoisan political culture. Like his fellow southern-born migrants and in common with many of the northern-born as well, Lincoln despised abolitionism as a misguided method of resolving the slavery issue. He also clearly respected the rights of southern states to determine the future of slavery within their borders, without outside interference. These two beliefs resided at the heart of central Illinoisan culture dominated by southern-born migrants in the 1830s. However, Lincoln’s adamant stand against slavery, though he may have thought it in perfect accord with the public position of his political idol Henry Clay, went too far for most of his neighbors who had left behind family and friends in the South. Most families retained southern connections, whether through written communication or simply cognizance that loved ones stayed behind. Yet all the family Lincoln really knew resided in the

³⁰ *CW*, I: 74–75; also in *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Tenth General Assembly of the State of Illinois*, 817–18.

³¹ Lincoln’s vote and protest are frequently referred to as evidence that Lincoln had always, or at least very early in his political career, evinced a moral antipathy to slavery. Simon, *Freedom’s Champion*, 72. Kenneth J. Winkle perceives Lincoln’s autobiographical statement as evidence that the Illinoisans’ views on slavery underwent no significant transformation from 1831 to 1860. “Thirty-five years later, Lincoln was still trying to steer a path between the rock of slavery on one side and the shoal of abolitionism on the other.” Most scholars agree. Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 257–58; Burton, *Age of Lincoln*, 113. Many scholars agree. Foner distinguishes between Lincoln’s personal feelings on slavery and his formation of an antislavery ideology, arguing that the first remained constant, while the second evolved over time. Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 62. “Always opposed in principle to the institution of slavery, he had not hitherto enlisted actively in the crusade against it.” Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962), 23. Until Kansas-Nebraska, he remained unwilling to “break a lifelong habit of near silence on the slavery issue.” James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), 53.

Northwest, until his marriage to Mary Todd endowed him with a set of southern in-laws. Lincoln understood the sentiments of these fellow southerners regarding slavery. As his colleague Cyrus Edwards, who served in the Illinois state Senate, wrote to fellow Illinoisan Joseph Gillespie in 1835 during a trip back to Kentucky: “‘The small farmers are all bought out and have wisely sought an asylum among our rich [Illinois] prairies,’ while the aristocrats “‘enjoy a monopoly of those thousands of acres, which creates a wilderness around them.’” These opinions surrounding Lincoln in Illinois convinced him that slavery was not just founded on “injustice” to blacks but “injustice and bad policy” pertaining to whites, as well.³²

Despite this comity of feeling between Lincoln and his fellow southern-born migrants, the young representative’s insistence upon proclaiming slavery a moral wrong, and his conviction that Congress did have the power to eliminate slavery in the District of Columbia, differentiated him from many northwesterners’ vehement attachment to the principles of popular sovereignty—a sentiment they had exhibited from the very beginning of Illinois statehood. From Lincoln’s perspective, then, very little distinguished the conciliatory resolutions of the Illinois legislature, which refused either to acknowledge this congressional power or to engage in any moral condemnation of slavery, from those issued by the southern states of Alabama, Virginia, Mississippi, and also Kentucky. As a young migrant representative whose employment had familiarized him with both southern- and northern-born migrants, Lincoln believed he understood both. He surely understood the sentiments of one Illinoisan, who explained in 1837 that due to the existence of slavery in Kentucky and Tennessee, “‘the white non-slaveholding

³² Cyrus Edwards to Joseph Gillespie, April 14, 1835, Joseph Gillespie Papers, found in Miller, *Lincoln and His World*, 144.

portion of the community are leaving there for a residence in this beautiful state....The poorest of those hands can obtain here 75 cents for a day's labor, with board and lodging; while in their own states no more than 31 ¼ cents can be got for the best of hands. This I have stated to show the evils resulting to the white portion of society by employing slaves to do the work of freemen.'” Whether or not Lincoln read these statements by William Smith published in the *Alton Observer* of February 2, 1837, he certainly heard similar opinions voiced by his neighbors.³³ Above all, nothing in the southern resolutions gave Lincoln great pause. Their concerns appeared similar to those of migrants in his own state, and the differences between the two were not so great as to cause him to believe the South constituted a different society from the North. He most likely believed the demand of southern legislators for penal laws against abolitionism sprung from their own misunderstanding of northwestern society, or their faulty categorical placement of Illinois with northeastern states like New York or Massachusetts.

From 1838 to 1839, another slave-related issue emerged in the General Assembly that required the attention of its legislators. On October 18, 1837, Kentucky Governor James Clark wrote a letter to Illinois Governor Joseph Duncan, with which he enclosed a preamble and resolution adopted by the Kentucky General Assembly. Clark explained that the contents of the resolution centered on the problem of fugitive slaves. Recognizing that the “misguided philanthropy” of some Illinoisans, as well as Ohioans and Indianans, had led them to hide and protect fugitive slaves who escaped from Kentucky, the members of the legislature passed a resolution requesting that Illinois adopt some measure to halt the practice. In explanation of this particular request to Illinois, Clark emphasized the “amicable intercourse and comity of feeling that now exists between the

³³ Miller, *Lincoln and His World*, 144–45.

States of Illinois and Kentucky.”³⁴ The issue of escaping fugitive slaves pervaded the South during this period. In the Eleventh General Assembly of Illinois’s first session in 1838–39, the committee on the Judiciary proposed a set of resolutions pertaining to fugitive slaves. The committee had been given the responsibility of responding to a communication the governor of Georgia had issued to Illinois and other free states. When the governor of Maine refused to deliver to Georgia two Maine citizens accused of assisting in the freeing of a Savannah slave, the Georgia governor sought support from Illinois and other free states against Maine for their governor’s inaction.³⁵

The Illinois committee responded first by “express[ing] a deep regret that any attempt should ever be made on the part of the citizens of the free States to interfere, in any manner whatever, with the rights of the citizens of the slaveholding States.” They considered the act of holding slaves “a constitutional privilege” and castigated abolitionism as a dangerous and self-defeating movement. Nevertheless, they refused to condemn the governor of Maine “until the Executive of that State should have an opportunity to explain the course which he has seen cause to pursue.” The Illinoisans then recommended two resolutions. The first pertained specifically to fugitive slaves, declaring “the refusal of the Executive of an State to deliver up...any person who may be charged with the commission of a crime” in another state as “dangerous to the rights of the people of the United States” and “clearly and directly in violation of the plain letter of the Constitution.” The second resolution more generally addressed the relationship between free and slave states. Here, the Illinois committee reiterated the General

³⁴ James Clark to Joseph Duncan, October 18, 1837, Joseph Duncan Correspondence, Illinois State Archives.

³⁵ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Eleventh General Assembly of the State of Illinois* (Vandalia, Ill.: William Walters, 1838), 62.

Assembly's previous assertion that "a free State or its citizens ought not to interfere with the property of slaveholding States; which property has been guarantied [sic] unto them by the Constitution of the United States, and without which guaranty, this Union, perhaps, would never have been formed."³⁶

Ultimately, consideration of the report and resolutions was postponed.³⁷

Nevertheless, the incident informed Lincoln that slave states needed assurances from free states that their rights would not be trampled upon by their northern neighbors. As legislators in a northwestern state, the Illinois General Assembly frequently had to uphold a middle ground, protecting antislavery doctrines within the state without imposing doctrines upon southerners or condemning them for the persistence of the slave system. Illinois navigated that middle ground by, unlike the national legislature, refusing to limit the freedom of petition to those who opposed slavery.³⁸ While the U.S. House instituted a "gag rule" in May 1836 to stifle discussion of the slavery issue in the national legislature, the state of Illinois explicitly rejected such limitations on the right to free speech.³⁹ On the contrary, when the Illinois Senate asked the House for its approval of a resolution "requiring the Engrossing Clerks of the Senate and House, respectively, to make out copies of memorials and resolutions, to be transmitted to Congress," Democrat John Calhoun, a New England migrant who Lincoln frequently debated in central Illinois,

³⁶ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Eleventh General Assembly of the State of Illinois*, 170–71.

³⁷ The *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Eleventh General Assembly of the State of Illinois* reports only that representative Webb of White County motioned to postpone discussion, and the motion was agreed to. The *Vandalia Free Press* of January 10, 1839, however, reports that Lincoln had also made a motion to indefinitely postpone consideration of the resolutions. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Eleventh General Assembly of the State of Illinois*, 171, and *CW*, I: 126.

³⁸ Miller, *Lincoln and His World*, 269, casts Calhoun's first resolution as a deliberate measure against the Slave Power and its "gag rule" in U.S. Congress.

³⁹ The U.S. House voted 117–68 to automatically table each antislavery petition the House received. As Freehling explains, the measure passed "because most Northern Democrats voted with the South." William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 336.

offered an amendment to the Senate that epitomized the sentiments of many Illinoisans on the issue of slavery and freedom of expression. Calhoun proposed inserting a resolution asserting “the right of the citizens to petition the Legislature for the redress of any grievance, or the correction of any wrong,” and “the imperative duty of the Legislature to receive, to listen to, and act upon any such petition.” He also carefully qualified this declaration with a firm reminder that the U.S. Congress had no right to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia or in U.S. Territories. Such action would amount to “an invasion of the rights of the States, and an infraction of the federal compact.” Calhoun’s amendment was tabled, then voted down when the Illinois House bundled together all but one of the amendments proposed by various House members, and voted on them together.⁴⁰

The House journal for the 11th General Assembly reports, later in the session, the passage of a similar resolution pertaining to slavery in Washington D.C., which was unanimously adopted: “That a law to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia would be inexpedient and unwise.” Originally, Mr. Edwards had included the clause “and unconstitutional” in this resolution, but Mr. Dubois amended it to exclude this assertion that Congress’s power to abolish slavery was actually constitutional—a controversial statement with which many disagreed. Thus, by merely stating that it *should* not be done, rather than saying it *could* not be done, the resolution gained the unanimous approval of all the representatives.⁴¹ The unanimous adoption of this resolution displays the moderation that dominated northwestern culture. In a state (and a legislature) comprised

⁴⁰ Ultimately, the House passed the Senate bill with no additional amendments or changes. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Eleventh General Assembly of the State of Illinois*, 334.

⁴¹ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Eleventh General Assembly of the State of Illinois*, 322–23, 329, 485; Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 113.

of southern-born and northern-born migrants with quite different experiences and opinions on slavery, settlers united around the conviction that although slavery may be wrong, abolitionism—a virulent and dangerous form of radicalism—was worse. John Mason Peck, an American Bible Society agent from Connecticut with whom Lincoln later corresponded, became widely known in central Illinois for his moderate antislavery principles. Though uncompromisingly antislavery in his personal feelings, Peck encouraged in 1839 the continued participation of slaveholders in the church so long as they “profess decided opposition to slavery in principle & profess to be desirous to emancipate their servants” in the future. Peck justified this rather liberal antislavery policy under “Tarrant’s Rules,” a set of guidelines constructed in 1807 for the perpetuation of antislavery churches. The Rules specifically stated that churches should not admit slaveholders, but also made a series of exceptions, including “some other cases, which we would wish the churches to be at liberty to judge of agreeably to the principles of humanity.”⁴²

From his experiences in the state legislature, Lincoln gained crucial exposure to the sentiments of the South and of his adopted state of Illinois regarding slavery. However, Lincoln’s own opinions on slavery, as well as his perception of geographically varying opinions on the institution, were not shaped merely by his General Assembly experiences. In Fall 1837 the slavery-related mob violence that had spurred southern legislatures to contact their northern neighbors erupted in Illinois. Two incidents—one locally significant, the other nationally infamous—rocked the state. In October 1837 Presbyterian minister Josiah Porter, a native of South Carolina whose parents had brought

⁴² J. M. Peck to E. Rodgers, May 25, 1839, Box 1, Folder 11, Church History Documents Collection, UC; Rev. John M. Peck, “Brief View of the Baptist Interest in Each of the United States,” *The American Quarterly Register* 14 (Boston: Press of T. R. Marvin, 1842): 50.

him to Kentucky before he settled in Illinois, announced that he would give a speech on slavery in Springfield. On the appointed day a mob gathered to oppose his “abolitionist” statements, interrupting his plans. Following the incident, Springfield residents gathered in a public meeting and passed a series of resolutions condemning the activities of abolitionists. They stated that abolitionist efforts were “neither necessary [n]or useful” and explained that “as citizens of a free State and a peaceable community, we deprecate any attempt to sow discord among us, or to create an excitement as to abolition which can be productive of no good result.” Further resolutions declared that “the doctrine of immediate emancipation of slaves in this country...is at variance with Christianity, and its tendency is to breed contention, broils, and mobs.” Those “calling themselves abolitionists, are designing, ambitious men, and dangerous members of society, and should be shunned by all good citizens.”⁴³ Springfield’s anti-abolitionist protest, aside from its focus on Christianity, largely reflected Abraham Lincoln’s personal views as stated in his protest against the Illinois General Assembly resolutions. Meanwhile, another incident, which influenced the course of abolitionism in Illinois for years thereafter, provoked Lincoln to castigate those who carried anti-abolitionism too far. On November 5, 1837, antislavery editor Elijah Lovejoy was killed by an anti-abolitionist mob in Alton, a mere 22 miles east of St. Louis, Missouri. A former resident of St. Louis, Lovejoy had moved across the Mississippi River into neighboring Illinois to continue editing his newspaper, the *Observer*, after a mob had destroyed his press and office possessions.⁴⁴

⁴³ Angle, “*Here I Have Lived*,” 79–80; and Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 28–29.

⁴⁴ Harriet Martineau, *The Martyr Age of the United States* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan and Co., 1839), 57, explains that after a mulatto man was burned at St. Louis, “he spoke out in his newspapers about the atrocity of the deed, and exposed the iniquities of the district judge, and the mob which overawed Marion

After shifting his operations, however, “some men, reportedly from across the river in Missouri,” again annihilated his printing press and threw it in the river.⁴⁵ In response to Alton residents’ concerns that he would both disturb the peace and give the town a bad reputation, Lovejoy publicly addressed his new neighbors and vowed that he was opposed to slavery but did not support abolitionism. To the contrary, Lovejoy claimed that he had “repeatedly denounced” abolitionists in the past and had in turn been “denounced by Garrison and others, as being in favor of slavery, because he was unwilling to go with the abolitionists in favor of all their measures.” His Alton paper, he promised, would not promote abolitionist doctrines, since he felt himself “less called upon to discuss the subject than when I was in St. Louis,” and he did not expect to highlight those issues in his new paper.⁴⁶

Over the next year, however, Lovejoy’s support eroded as his newspaper’s antislavery stance evolved into full-fledged abolitionism. He denounced colonization and other moderate avenues of resolving the slavery issue while gradually embracing the uncompromising stance of immediate emancipation. When residents voiced their concern that Lovejoy had broken his promise to them, he explained that “he could not bow to

College and brought two of the students before a Lynch Court. For this, his press and types were destroyed, and he established himself on the opposite side of the river, in the free State of Illinois.”

⁴⁵ Many of Alton’s citizens “expressed outrage at the destruction of Lovejoy’s equipment” because Alton had long enjoyed a “reputation of being a law-abiding city,” and they feared it would longer be considered as such. Simon, *Freedom’s Champion*, 57, 63. Robert M. Sutton, “Illinois’ Year of Decision, 1837,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 58 (Spring 1965), 46, also states the press had been destroyed “presumably by a St. Louis gang.” If St. Louis residents were indeed responsible for this incident, then the Illinois community’s ire is more understandable.

⁴⁶ According to Thomas Ford, Lovejoy “had resolved to come to a free State, and he thanked his God that he was now removed from slavery....being removed from the evil, he would have no cause to express [antislavery opinions]....it would look like cowardice to flee from the place where the evil existed, and come to a place where it did not exist, to oppose it.” Ford, *A History of Illinois: From its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Co., 1854), 234–35; Merton L. Dillon, *Elijah P. Lovejoy, Abolitionist Editor* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 91; Joseph C. and Owen Lovejoy, *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy; Who was Murdered in Defence of the Liberty of the Press, at Alton, Illinois, Nov. 7, 1837* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1838), 221.

their wishes without admitting the death of liberty of the press and freedom of speech.” Following this open embrace of immediate emancipation, Alton residents determined to halt Lovejoy’s radical activities. On August 21 his press was destroyed once again, and much of the support he had enjoyed from moderates evaporated. An additional press he ordered in September 1837 was immediately wrecked. The next, and last, printing press arrived on November 6, 1837. This time, Lovejoy had prepared to defend his machinery by positioning thirty friends in and around the warehouse in which the press had been placed. When a mob gathered to try and destroy Lovejoy’s press yet again, they set the warehouse on fire, forcing him and his cohorts outside. When Lovejoy emerged from around the corner of the warehouse, pistol in hand, he was shot in the chest and mortally wounded.⁴⁷

Lovejoy’s activities in Alton and his killing in late 1837 marked a crucial turning point in the development of the Illinois antislavery movement. Besides running the *Observer*, Lovejoy had coordinated a convention in late October to discuss the formation of a statewide anti-slavery society. Meeting at the house of Thaddeus B. Hurlbut, the group adopted a set of very exclusive resolutions that countered the alternate, moderate colonization movement that remained popular throughout the state. As fellow Illinois abolitionist Edward Beecher explained, “all offers of compromise and co-operation” with colonizationists and antislavery moderates “were fruitless. Those who were satisfied with the plans of the Colonization Society as the only effectual means of removing slavery, would of course reject our views entirely, and pronounce all discussion of the subject of immediate emancipation useless.” Upholding their principles against slavery and refusing

⁴⁷ Simon, *Freedom’s Champion*, 64, 69, 70, 73, 80, 81, 86, 88; Sutton, “Illinois’ Year of Decision,” 47–48, 50–51.

any measure of compromise, the group adopted a declaration “that the system of slavery is in all cases sinful; and that it is safe and a duty for the slaveholding states immediately to abolish it; and to replace it by wise and equitable laws, adapted to the emancipated.” While Beecher claimed he never bore unkind feelings toward the colonization society, he admitted he “never had the slightest faith in it as a means of removing slavery.” Thus, Lovejoy, Beecher, and their cohorts worked to create a statewide abolitionist society that stood far outside the mainstream of Illinois political culture.⁴⁸

Moderates—including colonizationists—at first responded to Lovejoy’s abolitionist activities by attempting to compromise with the abolitionists or convince them to accept moderate doctrines. Fervent antislavery Illinoisans like John Mason Peck, editor of the *Western Pioneer*, and Rev. John Hogan, to whom moderates turned in October 1837 with the plea that he compromise with Lovejoy, sought to placate the rising tide against abolitionism in Alton as well as channel Lovejoy’s activities into what they deemed more fruitful endeavors. The early historian Thomas Ford alleges that Hogan and Benjamin Godfrey, a leading Presbyterian, “had seen the effect of abolitionism in the slave States, where, instead of breaking the fetters of the slave, it had increased their strength and severity.”⁴⁹ New Englander John Peck actively promoted the colonization society as a method of addressing the slavery issue without lapsing into radical abolitionism. A *Western Pioneer* article published on October 27, 1837 stated: “The *Pioneer* hoped that the meeting of the colonization society, the invariable counter-irritant to abolition, might set things on the right path even though ‘a very few restless spirits will be disappointed, vexed, mortified, and may struggle for a little time to enjoy notoriety.’”

⁴⁸ Edward Beecher, *Narrative of Riots at Alton: In Connection with the Death of Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy* (Alton: George Holton, 1838), 35, 38, 41; Ford, *History of Illinois*, 288.

⁴⁹ Ford, *History of Illinois*, 236–37, 288–89.

Echoing the sentiments of the Illinois legislature, the *Pioneer* asserted that ““the benevolent and real friends to humanity will co-operate to benefit the oppressed in a way consistent with the peace of our Union and the happiness and rights of all concerned.”” When Rev. Hogan could reach no agreement with Lovejoy, he informed the abolitionist that they could not protect him from mob action if he continued to renounce moderation in favor of more radical principles.⁵⁰

Despite the acceptance of moderate antislavery principles in and around Alton, Lovejoy and his fellow abolitionists became more committed to controversial abolitionist principles and less willing to entertain any sort of compromise in founding a statewide society against slavery. Very soon after Lovejoy’s death in November, abolitionists seized the opportunity to declare him a martyr to the abolitionist cause. Harriet Martineau admitted in 1839 that they had always recognized the potential of such an unfortunate event. “Dr. [William Ellery] Channing had said, a year before this,” she pointed out, that ‘One kidnapped, murdered abolitionist would do more for the violent destruction of slavery than a thousand societies. His name would be sainted.’” After Lovejoy’s death, she proclaimed, “These latter clauses have come true.” Elijah’s brothers Joseph C. and Owen Lovejoy, meanwhile, immediately released a nearly four-hundred-page biography of “Elijah P. Lovejoy, Who was Murdered in Defence of the Liberty of the Press.” In this apotheosis of their fallen brother, they cast martyrdom as “the ordeal through which all great improvements in the condition of men, are doomed to pass.”⁵¹

Newspapers across the U.S. reported the incident at Alton. Widespread condemnation of the Lovejoy murder spread, “mass meetings were held, sermons

⁵⁰ *Western Pioneer*, October 27, 1837, in Theodore Calvin Pease, *The Frontier State: 1818-1848* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1922), 367.

⁵¹ Martineau, *The Martyr Age*, 65; Lovejoy, *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy*, 12.

preached, lectures given.”⁵² Though little evidence exists to pinpoint this event as a particularly transformative one for Lincoln, it certainly altered the direction of Illinois politics, boosting the antislavery effort and transforming the lives of men who, like William Herndon, would become Lincoln’s close friends and political associates in later years. One of these was Lyman Trumbull, who considered Lovejoy’s death a turning point in his antislavery convictions and wrote his father from Illinois College in Jacksonville. Though “opposed to the immediate emancipation of the slaves and to the doctrine of Abolitionism,” he assured his father, “yet had I been in Alton, I would have cheerfully marched to the rescue of Mr. Lovejoy and his property.” Antislavery societies spread more rapidly across the state, and Lovejoy supporters quickly determined to establish another press.⁵³ J. W. Buchanan, a resident of Carlinville, Illinois, corresponded with Thaddeus B. Hurlbut, the minister who had provided his home for the establishment of Lovejoy’s abolitionist organization, about reinstating the *Observer*. The separation between antislavery and abolitionist Illinoisans made this difficult. Buchanan argued that the new *Observer* should be managed by abolitionists committed to the principles of immediate emancipation—not by the multitude who upheld abolitionists’ right to free speech and hated slavery but denounced abolitionist principles and methods. While Buchanan felt not “the slightest degree of ill-nature towards those men for their difference of opinion,” he nevertheless believed the press should not be run by those

⁵² Simon, *Freedom’s Champion*, 154–55. See pages 159–62 for an extended discussion of the varied reactions Illinois newspapers had to this event. The Whig and Democratic state organizations, meanwhile, “avoided discussion of the incident as much as possible,” since “[a]nti-abolitionist sentiment in Illinois was widespread.” Aryeh Maidenbaum, “Sounds of Silence: An Aspect of Lincoln’s Whig Years,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 82 (Autumn 1989): 174.

⁵³ Lyman Trumbull to his father, Nov. 12, 1837, found in Simon, *Freedom’s Champion*, 165. Pease, *The Frontier State*, 370.

“incapable of appreciating the importance of the [abolitionist] cause, or of exercising a due amount of sympathy for those engaged in it.”⁵⁴

In fall of 1838 Illinois antislavery activists finally decided that, rather than position a press back in Alton, they would endorse the re-establishment of Benjamin Lundy’s abolitionist paper, the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, in Hennepin, Illinois. Erastus Wright, a Springfield abolitionist committed to organizing antislavery forces in Illinois, explained Lundy’s unparalleled experience in the industry, publishing his paper for a total of nearly seventeen years in various states of the Union, including Ohio, Tennessee, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. A December 1838 proposal to assist Lundy in resuming his press in Illinois detailed the abolitionist history of the paper and Lundy’s intention that its message should not make any changes. “[I]ts principal design has ever been, and will continue to be,” he asserted, “the advocacy of *Free Discussion*; the TOTAL ABOLITION OF SLAVERY; and the firm establishment of the *constitutional, inalienable, and ‘universal’* rights of man. These objects are sought to be accomplished by the promulgation of facts and arguments—by moral suasion—by appeals to the reason, justice, and reflection, of the people and their representatives.”⁵⁵ The incident sparked abolitionist and antislavery movements in Illinois. However, it also prompted many to turn away from individuals or organizations that vocally denounced slavery. Many viewed Lovejoy’s quick evolution from antislavery activism to abolitionism as an intentional, calculated attempt to placate his new neighbors. His initial pledge to them appeared no more than a ploy designed to gain a foothold in Alton, rather than a sincere

⁵⁴ J. W. Buchanan to Rev. Hurlbut, Feb. 16, 1838, Notes on Illinois Anti-Slavery Convention, Thaddeus B. Hurlbut, ALPL.

⁵⁵ Pease, *Frontier State*, 370; Prospectus for Emancipation Newspaper and Anti-slavery society, Erastus Wright Papers, ALPL.

promise to the community. Therefore, while on the one hand Lovejoy's death boosted support for the cause against slavery, it also imbued many with an intense distrust of any one who vocally opposed slavery but claimed to be a moderate. By 1850 many Democrats turned this wariness of abolitionism into a political tactic, charging that their opponents "cared more for 'bestial blacks,' mere 'human brutes,' than for the noble white race."⁵⁶

Lovejoy's murder resulted in no legal repercussions on either side, since both the mob and the warehouse defenders were acquitted for their roles on that fateful night. Nevertheless, the force of his death rippled across Illinois.⁵⁷ In a broad sense Lincoln responded to these momentous events, relating them to the discussions and resolutions he encountered as a member of the Illinois General Assembly. In his January 27, 1838, address "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions" to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Lincoln displayed a keen awareness of America's international role as a republic founded upon principles of "civil and religious liberty" and "equal rights." Speaking to a group of educated young men, he explained that the greatest danger to the republic would not come from foreign nations but rather would "spring up amongst us." Above all, Lincoln decried "the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country," particularly "the worse than savage mobs." He did not, however, rest his assertions on the incidence of mob violence against abolitionists or African Americans,

⁵⁶ Merton L. Dillon believes Lovejoy misled his audience regarding his real intentions and beliefs, asserting that "Lovejoy probably never made a more unfortunate public statement, for it was filled with half-truths and ambiguities." Dillon, *Elijah P. Lovejoy*, 91. David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828–1861: Toward Civil War* (New York and other cities: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.

⁵⁷ As David Grimsted declares in his study on slavery-related mob violence in the 1830s U.S.: "Every mob made some new abolitionists." Grimsted, *American Mobbing*, 51; John Gill, *Tide without Turning: Elijah P. Lovejoy and the Freedom of the Press* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), 205; Ford, *A History of Illinois*, 245; Pease, *Frontier State*, 368; Richard B. Kielbowicz, "The Law and Mob Law in Attacks on Antislavery Newspapers, 1833–1860," *Law and History Review* 24 (Fall 2006): 592.

alone. Instead, he claimed that mobs “have pervaded the country, from New England to Louisiana;--they are neither peculiar to the eternal snows of the former, nor the burning suns of the latter;--they are not the creature of climate—neither are they confined to the slaveholding, or the non-slaveholding States. Alike, they spring up among the pleasure hunting masters of Southern slaves, and the order loving citizens of the land of steady habits.” He provided a few specific examples of such cases of mob violence: the state of Mississippi’s lynching of gamblers and of black and white men suspected of insurrection, and the burning to death of a free mulatto man in St. Louis.

Lincoln held up these examples as evidence that mob law resulted in uninhibited violence, and that violence often did not stop at the punishment of those who had done wrong. Too often “the innocent, those who have ever set their faces against violations of law in every shape...fall victims to the ravages of mob law.” The tragedies wrought by mobs, he argued, extended even further. Government, itself, often became a casualty of mob violence. The examples provided by mob perpetrators, who were often left unpunished after committing acts of murder, encouraged others “to become lawless in practice.” Those who followed the letter and spirit of the law, meanwhile, “become tired of, and disgusted with, a Government that offers them no protection.” Referring to Lovejoy’s death in Alton months before, Lincoln issued a strong warning that “whenever the vicious portion of population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, and burn churches, ravage and rob provision stores, throw printing presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure, and with impunity; depend on it, this Government cannot last.” As disruptive as abolitionism might prove to the community, in no instance does it ever legitimate mob action. Either

abolitionism “is right within itself,” or it “is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments,” but never by the unlawful actions of a body of angry citizens. Lincoln then implicitly denounced both abolitionists and radical proslavery southerners, who prized their principles over and above the law: “Towering genius,” explained, “disdains a beaten path; it “thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.” When such men of genius and ambition rise to power in America, he urged, the people, driven by their attachment to the Constitution and to the principles of the American republic, must be ready to defeat them.⁵⁸

Lincoln’s responses to the southern state legislature memorials and to Lovejoy’s murder displayed a northwestern adherence to moderation on the slavery issue, though his moral repugnance for slavery separated him from many migrants, and most southern-born settlers, to Illinois. In 1838 Lincoln’s sense of the dangers posed by the South’s attachment to slavery stemmed largely from his exposure to the opinions of southern migrants in Illinois, to the statements of southern legislatures, and to the proposals of his Illinois colleagues. He also, however, had accumulated a very small set of direct experiences that clearly affected him and his views of the slavery problem before he arrived in the U.S. Congress. He acquired these experiences during his two flatboat trips to New Orleans in 1828 and 1831, when he visited Joshua Fry Speed’s family’s

⁵⁸ *CW*, I: 113–14. Robert McCluer Calhoun claims this address “examined the political soul of the Middle West.” Calhoun, *Political Moderation: America’s First Two Centuries* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 185–86. Indeed, the *Illinois State Register* of Vandalia reflected Lincoln’s attitude, rhetorically asking: “Are the laws to be put down, and Lynch law to become the order of the day?” in one issue, then in the next, making it “clear it opposed Abolition.” *Illinois State Register* (Vandalia, Ill.) in Simon, *Freedom’s Champion*, 49. Aryeh Maidenbaum asserts Lincoln’s disapproval of the two extremes of abolitionism and mob violence stemmed directly from Illinois political culture. Maidenbaum, “Sounds of Silence,” 174; Kenneth J. Winkle, “The Great Body of the Republic” in Cayton and Gray, eds., *The American Midwest*, 112–13.

Kentucky plantation in August 1841, and, consequent to marrying, while spending time with Mary Lincoln's family in Lexington. These events continued to inform his opinions on slavery and the South through 1860, when as a presidential candidate he recounted a particular incident from his travels. Lincoln explained that he took his first trip at the age of nineteen, before he had moved from Indiana to Illinois, as the hired helper of a storeowner's son, who needed to transport goods down to New Orleans. "The nature of part of the cargo-load," Lincoln explicated, "made it necessary for them to linger and trade along the Sugar coast...and one night they were attacked by seven negroes with intent to kill and rob them. They were hurt some in the melee, but succeeded in driving the negroes from the boat, and then 'cut cable' 'weighed anchor' and left." By simply retelling this incident, rather than utilizing it to make inferences regarding African Americans, poor whites, slaves, or slavery, Lincoln simply recreated a scene he imagined white southern-born northwesterners and white southerners could relate to. The exigencies of circumstances in 1860 make it difficult to determine what this incident meant for Lincoln when it actually occurred. However, it does indicate that although Lincoln saw very little of slavery, he paid close attention to, and took very seriously, those events and instances when slavery confronted him. New Orleans, and the settlements along the Mississippi River that Lincoln must have witnessed along his two journeys, exposed him to plantation slavery, slave trading, and the hunting down of fugitive slaves.⁵⁹ As Richard Campanella notes, these flatboat journeys down the

⁵⁹ *CW*, IV: 62; Eric Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 10, argues that "The impact of these visits on Lincoln's views of slavery...must remain a matter of speculation." Richard Campanella recreates the world that surrounded Lincoln as he travelled down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, and particularly highlights the aspects of southern slavery that Lincoln could scarcely have avoided during his journeys. As he explains, runaway alerts, jail notices, and slave trading announcements abounded in the local newspapers, which Lincoln may have read during his stay in New Orleans, and were plastered on walls and posts in the city. Campanella, *Lincoln in New Orleans*, 66, 83, 111, 312.

Mississippi River significantly opened a window onto Deep South slave society that Lincoln had not before accessed. While in “Lincoln’s *public* autobiographical notes, the attack, and not slavery or slave trading, formed the single most salient recollection of both his Louisiana voyages,” his exposure to the various aspects of slave society in the plantation South certainly imbedded him with a deep sense of slavery in its most active or virulent form. Confronted for the first time with a society that revolved around slavery, Lincoln may have understood why so many southern non-slaveholders flocked to Illinois.⁶⁰

Following these two journeys down the Mississippi River, Lincoln took trips to Kentucky in the 1840s to stay with Joshua Speed near Louisville, and with his wife’s family near Lexington. While these powerful experiences certainly shaped Lincoln’s opinions on slavery, their impact was conditioned and directed, in large part, by the idea of the South he had formed while living and working among southern-born settlers in Illinois. Lincoln’s firsthand encounters with slavery certainly left a deep impression upon him and fostered his early resolve that he was opposed to slavery. Yet, that resolution “was not born of the minute,” from a single incident or set of brief encounters with the institution in the South. Rather, it was shaped by “these communities of southern Indiana and central Illinois where Lincoln had developed in a society freed from chattel slavery and had a chance to form his own ideas of human labor and the full freedom of wage contract.”⁶¹

Though a slave state, Kentucky slavery differed greatly from that of the plantation slavery Lincoln witness in New Orleans during the 1830s. On average, slaveholders in

⁶⁰ Campanella, *Lincoln in New Orleans*, 81, 303–04.

⁶¹ Martin Hayes Bickham, “Some Influences of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 Upon the Career of Abraham Lincoln,” Copy of radio address delivered February 9, 1938, Lincolniana Collection, ALPL.

Kentucky held far fewer slaves than slaveholders in the Deep South. The colonization movement's strongest foothold rested in this border state, and an 1833 Nonimportation Act "prohibited the importation of slaves for sale within the state."⁶² Lincoln's wife, and his best friend, had both grown up in this society, raised by families that owned slaves. Lincoln left no record of his impressions of Kentucky slaveholding society following this visit to his in-laws. He did, however, remark upon a specific incident that occurred during his return from Kentucky with Joshua Speed in 1841. In a letter to Joshua Speed's sister Mary Speed, written on Sept. 27, 1841, Lincoln related that on their boat ride to St. Louis, they saw a slave trader transporting twelve African American slaves from Kentucky "to a farm in the South....the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line." Lincoln pondered at slavery's destructive force in the lives of the enslaved, noting that these people "were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where." He was thus surprised to find these enslaved people "were the most cheerful and apparantly happy creatures on board. One, whose offence for which he had been sold was an over-fondness for his wife, played the fiddle almost continually; and the others danced, sung, cracked jokes, and played various games with cards from day to day." Wondering at God's power to make "the worst of human conditions tolerable," he

⁶² Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 21, 32; James A. Ramage and Andrea S. Watkins, *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 263. William A. Link's depiction of Virginia, whose "economy was diversified, with strong commercial connections to the North," fits Kentucky just as well. He also highlights both Virginia and Kentucky's gradual emancipationist movements, which perpetuated in the state well into the 1840s. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 196–97.

considered the episode “a fine example...for contemplating the effect of *condition* upon human happiness.” As Eric Foner notes, Lincoln’s reaction to this direct encounter with slavery and the slave trade did not reflect the views of an abolitionist, or even one whose moral antipathy to the institution would compel him to act against it with any force.⁶³

When Lincoln defeated Peter Cartwright to become the next congressman from the Springfield area, he spent three or four weeks in Lexington with his in-laws before continuing his eastward journey to Washington, D.C. After growing up in a household worked by slaves, Mary Lincoln was accustomed to the idea that African Americans were owned by her family, and worked as servants for her, her siblings, parents, and guests. Mary’s father, Robert Todd, though he never freed his slaves, exhibited the type of political moderation on slavery that Lincoln supported and expected from many southerners. Robert Todd was serving in the Kentucky senate in Fall 1847, when the Lincolns visited them in Lexington before moving on to Washington, D.C. As a gradual emancipationist Whig, Todd rebuked all attempts to allow the importation of slaves into the state of Kentucky and supported colonization as a means to rid the South of slavery.⁶⁴

These opinions aligned well with Lincoln’s own conviction that slavery was both immoral and dangerous to the Union but should not be attacked with abolitionism or any species of radicalism. During his nearly three-week stay with the Todds, he experienced slavery within a household for the second time. He also must have read of runaways and

⁶³ *CW*, I: 259–61. Eric Foner points to Lincoln’s 1855 letter to Speed, in which he retold this experience with greater emphasis on the moral dilemma it posed, as proof that Lincoln’s feelings on the subject of slavery had changed by the mid-1850s. Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 11–12.

⁶⁴ Nat Turner’s insurrection had spurred Kentucky to pass a non-importation act “to ban slave imports in an effort to prevent itself from becoming substantially blacker.” Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 359; Winkle, *Young Eagle*, 228; Stephen Berry, *House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, A Family Divided by War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 40–41; Robert S. Todd to Ninian Edwards, July 12, 1841, Robert S. Todd Papers, ALPL.

slave auctions in the city's newspapers and perhaps witnessed such events take place. Yet from this stay, previous visits, and the remarks of Kentucky-born Illinoisans, Lincoln also developed a much more enhanced sense of the politics of slavery in Kentucky than in any other slave state of the Union. He knew of the widespread devotion toward Henry Clay and, thereby, to moderation on the slavery issue. Lexington epitomized moderate antislavery politics in the 1840s. Those who were antislavery were free to speak about the issue, while proslavery or moderate Lexingtonians carefully denounced the harsh treatment of slaves, slave trading, and other abuses often produced by the system.⁶⁵ This congressman-elect from Illinois thereby re-engaged with the state of his birth after an extended period of living and working in Illinois. There is also a chance that Lincoln had the opportunity to meet Henry Clay during this interlude just prior to a single-term congressional career. By their mutual attachment to Clay and the Whig Party, the bonds of affection between Lincoln and Mary Todd had been fostered, if not initiated.⁶⁶

Despite his modest resumé as a self-educated, self-improved first-term congressman, Lincoln may have perceived such a meeting with his political idol as a very real possibility. Besides his marriage into a powerful Kentucky Whig family whose home neighbored Clay's "Ashland," Lincoln also knew of the intimate ties of migration that bound his state of Illinois with that of Kentucky. As Mark E. Neely shows in his study of Springfield's 1843 voting records, Whig sentiment did not, as is often presumed, abound

⁶⁵ Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 13; Berry, *House of Abraham*, 17–18.

⁶⁶ **PAGE NUMBER!** Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* II, notes that one such auction "was held in mid-November, when a man sold five of his slaves to satisfy a judgment obtained against him by Robert Smith Todd," Mary Todd Lincoln's father. Stephen Berry marks this as occurring during "a pivotal moment" for Lincoln. Berry, *House of Abraham*, 38. Lincoln makes no mention of meeting Henry Clay, but several historians, including Berry, have pointed out that Mary claims to have introduced her husband to him. David and Jeanne Heidler refute these interpretations, marking it extremely unlikely that Lincoln would have met his political idol but never spoken of it. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010), 498 n.24.

with New Englanders, but actually proved strongest among Virginia- and Kentucky-born Illinois residents.⁶⁷ Illinois Whigs were particularly sensitive to this attachment and confidently sought to foster it. Those in Springfield, an overwhelmingly Whig stronghold in a Democratic state, perhaps held more confidence in their own efforts to turn their neighbors to the party of Clay. Thus they sent appeals similar to one signed by Lincoln on August 29, 1842, requesting that Clay visit their state. Assuring the Whig leader that such a visit would not prove futile, Lincoln and the rest of the Executive Committee of the Clay Club in Illinois promised “such a reception as shall be worthy of the man on whom are now turned the fondest hopes of a great and suffering nation.”⁶⁸ In June 1844 Lincoln and his Whig cohorts worked on behalf of Clay in the hopes that he might finally realize his ambition of attaining the presidency. As a member of the committee on resolutions, Lincoln helped draft a set of resolutions that supported Clay’s nomination and highlighted the role of Illinois in the upcoming election. Expressing “the warmest and deepest feelings...for the noble and generous qualities so peculiarly characteristic of our gallant HARRY of the WEST,” the convention declared its support for Clay for president in 1844. The convention then described Illinois’s political position, admitting that “the Whigs of Illinois” are “often beaten in their political battles.” Nevertheless, they promised, “we will fall into the phalanx of the Whig States, with a majority that shall show that in ‘every peril’ *the Suckers* are willing to ‘divide the danger.’”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ As Mark E. Neely, Jr., explains, Lincoln, Albert T. Bledsoe, and Stephen T. Logan—all Kentuckians—wrote the 1843 Illinois Whig party’s official address. Neely, Jr., ed., *The Extra Journal, Rallying the Whigs of Illinois* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1982), FHS.

⁶⁸ Clay declined the offer on September 6, 1842. *CW*, I: 297.

⁶⁹ *CW*, I: 338, 340. Daniel Walker Howe discusses “why Abraham Lincoln was a Whig,” when his “poor southern farming family” background tended to “yield followers of Andrew Jackson” rather than Henry Clay.” Howe argues Lincoln’s personal drive “to recast himself in a certain mold” led him to identify with the values espoused by Henry Clay. Howe, “Why Abraham Lincoln Was a Whig,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 16 (Winter 1995): 28, 37.

This expression of confidence by the underdog political party in the state of Illinois revolved, in large part, around Kentucky- and Virginia-born Illinoisans' belief that there existed a special connection between their state and Kentucky.⁷⁰ For most of the antebellum period, many Kentuckians reciprocated this bond with the Northwest.⁷¹ As part of this group and a native of Kentucky who married into a Kentucky slaveholding family, Lincoln keenly felt this connection. More importantly, it bolstered his recognition that when he arrived in Congress in 1847, he would be the sole Whig representative from his state—the “Lone Whig Star of Illinois.” This characterization evidently stuck throughout Lincoln’s term in Congress. As he wrote to Thaddeus Stevens in a September 3, 1848, letter, after the longest session of the 30th Congress had ended: “You may possibly remember seeing me at the Philadelphia Convention—introduced to you as the long whig star of Illinois.” This heightened awareness of his own singularity undoubtedly inspired Lincoln to follow the strong stance adopted by Whig Party leader Henry Clay against the Mexican War and to reach Washington prepared for combat against Democratic ideas. It also convinced him that a western Whig would be best suited to the task of remodeling the Whig Party around a set of national ideals that would not upset either the North or the South. When he arrived in Washington in December 1847, Lincoln intended to draw upon his western political culture to aid the Whig Party. He perhaps

⁷⁰ A. P. Field inadvertently expressed this bond while working to elect Harrison to the presidency in 1840. He urged southern Illinoisans to “[w]rite to Indiana and Kentucky & they will send down their hosts” to attend a convention at Shawneetown. A. P. Field to Henry Eddy, June 8, 1840, Box 2, Folder 19, Henry Eddy Papers, UIUC.

⁷¹ With political ties, as well as “extensive kin and social ties to those living in states such as Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, Kentuckians and Missourians rarely viewed the national debates over slavery as irreconcilable.” Astor, *Rebels on the Border*, 9.

little knew how significant the Northwest, and its founding document, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, would be to his single term in Congress.⁷²

⁷² *CW*, II: 1. Newspapers of the period mentioned Lincoln as the “Lone Star of Illinois.” *Ibid.*, I: 475; II: 5. David Donald adopted this title for his chapter on Lincoln’s term in Congress. Donald, *Lincoln*, 119–41. He also notes that Lincoln was introduced as such in June 1848, when he addressed a Whig meeting in Delaware. *Ibid.*, 127.

Chapter Four

Lincoln, the Northwest Ordinance, and the 30th Congress

Lincoln's years in the Illinois state legislature made him well informed on the issues and opinions in Illinois and the rest of the Northwest. By 1847 this northwesterner had developed into a well-spoken, established state congressman prepared to represent his state in the national legislature. Eager both to make his mark and to become a good representative of his constituents' interests, Lincoln arrived in Washington, D.C., in December 1847 and delivered his first speech before the House of Representatives of the 30th Congress on the nation's biggest political issue—the Mexican War. Historians usually focus on these and other particular efforts and statements Lincoln made during his term in Congress. However, as a freshman congressman serving a single term, from December 1847 to March 1849, this ambitious Illinoisan did much more listening than speaking. For months he witnessed fellow representatives from all over the country give speeches, make motions, and debate the nation's most pressing issues. One of the most important topics discussed throughout the 30th Congress, the extension of slavery, pervaded House discussions after Pennsylvania representative David Wilmot's introduction of the anti-slavery mandate known as "the Wilmot Proviso" in 1846. By the time Lincoln served in Congress the following term, politicians had developed more advanced arguments for or against the Proviso. In order to understand the critical effects Lincoln's term in Congress had upon his viewpoint, we must consider what he heard from his fellow congressmen. Their opinions and ensuing discussions shaped Lincoln's own views on the South and its "peculiar" institution, slavery.¹

¹ Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, I: 458; Eric Foner, "The Wilmot Proviso Revisited," *Journal of American History*, 56 (September 1969): 262–279.

Congressmen frequently referred to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 during many of these discussions. David Wilmot's infamous proviso had intentionally been modeled upon the ordinance, specifying that in the territories acquired by the United States from Mexico, "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist." These words had first been penned by Thomas Jefferson in application to the Northwest Territory, and in congressional discussions from 1846 onward, pro- and anti-proviso congressmen characterized the Wilmot Proviso as an extension of the (in)famous ordinance.² Sitting in the House chamber in Washington, D.C., throughout most of the discussions of the 30th Congress, Lincoln heard of the significance of the Northwest Ordinance again and again. Almost simultaneously, he began receiving correspondence from distant southern relatives inquiring about his family's ancestry and migration to the Northwest. Lincoln first appeared to rediscover his familial and ancestral roots in Fall 1844, when he returned to his old neighborhood in Indiana, venturing "into the neighborhood in that State in which I was raised, where my mother and only sister were buried, and from which I had been absent about fifteen years." He consequently wrote a poem, "My Child-hood Home I see Again," which he sent in April 1846 to a former friend of his childhood, Andrew Johnston. However, it was not until 1848, during his first session in Congress, that Lincoln conducted a prolonged investigation into his family's roots.

² Thomas Jefferson had headed the committee that originally proposed a prohibition of slavery in all western territories made into U.S. states after 1800, declaring that there would be "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said states." Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom and Expansion*, 9; Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 17–18; Joseph G. Rayback, *Free Soil: The Election of 1848* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 78–79; John S. Wright, *Lincoln and the Politics of Slavery* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1970), 11.

The confluence of these two influences—family correspondence and political arguments concerning the Northwest Ordinance—surely (re)awakened Lincoln to the connections between the Northwest Ordinance and anti-slave system migrants. The arguments he heard from and about southerners during this congressional term further shaped his northwestern regional perspective on slavery and the South. That conception, gathered during the 30th Congress, greatly influenced Lincoln's approach as a state political leader in the 1850s and conditioned his response to the South in 1860 and 1861.

The geographical shift from Illinois to Washington, D.C., exposed Lincoln to new sets of opinions and perspectives, influencing his idea of slavery and the South; yet, Lincoln did not simply replace his northwestern perspective with a national one as a result of serving a single term in the national legislature. Rather, this new orientation forced him to re-consider his very origins, upbringing, and political rise—all of which had taken place in the free Northwest, where he had lived since the age of seven. In Washington, D.C., he witnessed constant debate over perhaps the most important document in Illinois history, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. That single piece of legislation had set the groundwork for the future state of Illinois, declared that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude” shall exist in the Northwest Territory, and had, by these and other laws, attracted a particular set of migrants to the Northwest who otherwise might have settled in the Southwest. Throughout Lincoln's two sessions, congressmen persistently argued over the possible application of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 to Oregon Territory and the territories acquired from Mexico. As a member of Congress during these discussions, Lincoln learned firsthand the different ways northerners and southerners often viewed the Northwest Ordinance. Although he

personally abhorred slavery as a moral evil and had every day worked and lived with those who considered it a social evil, Lincoln may not have fully realized the overarching importance of the Northwest Territory until this single term in Congress from 1847 to 1849.

His experiences there also provoked Lincoln to turn his attention away from the free-soil Northwest and to consider the South. His accumulation of the arguments voiced by his fellow colleagues, both northern and southern, initiated a belief that a Slave Power worked in the South and in the national government to establish greater control and power over the South and the nation. In Congress, Lincoln began to build upon the ideas of the South he had been surrounded by in Illinois, where fellow migrants sought greater freedom in free territory. He gathered greater proof that the South had become a restrictive society that bound and gagged the white nonslaveholder.³ Lincoln, who believed individuals tend to be driven as much by their own economic self-interest as by any moral or intellectual beliefs, particularly honed in on what he believed to be a great lack of freedom and opportunity for the white nonslaveholder in the South.⁴

³ As Leonard Richards, Chaplain W. Morrison and Jonathan Earle highlight, the “slave power” idea became much more prominent during Polk’s administration, when Van Burenites split away from Polk’s administration and castigated the “aggressive slavemasters” who “stole the heart and soul of the Democratic Party and began dictating a course of the nation’s destiny.” Leonard Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 159; Morrison, *Democratic Politics*; Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Rayback, *Free Soil*, 78–79, argues the free soil movement fit squarely within the already-existing tensions within the Democratic Party, rather than providing the blow that eventually divided it in half, while Joel Silbey points out that both the Whig and Democratic parties maintained their core constituents despite the separate strains of slavery and antislavery. Silbey, *Party over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 140. Regardless of their immediate effectiveness in disrupting the two major political organizations, the free soil and slave power arguments suddenly became legitimate on a national level and comprised a major portion of national discourse during these years.

⁴ Lincoln occasionally expressed his belief that economic self-interest directed men’s actions. *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess., 533. His conviction that the South stifled the nonslaveholder was matched by a converse one, that the free Northwest held ample opportunities for hard-working men. When his step-brother John D. Johnston wrote him in December 1848 asking for a loan, Lincoln refused, noting that hard work would provide Johnston with the means to repay his debts. *CW*, II: 15–16.

Although Lincoln spent only a single term in the House of Representatives, the combined effects of the Mexican War, the Wilmot Proviso, and the 1848 presidential campaign resulted in a “momentous” 30th Congress.⁵ In the less than two years he spent in Washington, D.C., this Kentucky-born Illinoisan gained a firsthand look at the problems facing the nation—not just the state of Illinois, or the Northwest—that left him with an altered perspective on the issues of slavery and the South. When the 30th Congress opened on December 6, 1847, the Mexican army had recently surrendered to the United States, peace talks had begun, and President James K. Polk, then in the third year of his presidential term, had by his actions cleaved the Democratic Party into opposing factions. As the term advanced, two slavery-related issues often enveloped the proceedings: the status of territories acquired from Mexico and the desire to eliminate slavery and/or the slave trade in Washington, D.C. With the 21st Rule (known as the Gag Rule) abolished from the House in 1844, many congressmen freely voiced their opinions and those of their constituents regarding slavery’s presence in the annexed areas. In the midst of these debates, in February 1848, ardent opponent of the Gag Rule John Quincy Adams collapsed in the House and died soon thereafter. Throughout these events and circumstances Lincoln watched, learned, and participated.⁶

⁵ Henry W. Moore wrote to Democratic Congressman from Illinois John A. McClernand in 1848 that “[y]ou will have a momentous session,” due to the persistence of the Whig opposition, Clay’s stand in opposition to the Mexican War, and the inevitable acquisition of territory that would result from the conflict. Henry W. Moore to J. A. McClernand, January 6, 1848, John A. McClernand Collection, ALPL.

⁶ Congressman had debating the possibility of abolishing slavery and/or the slave trade in Washington, D.C. for decades. Although the abolition of the Gag Rule in 1844 had re-opened debate upon slavery in the House, the slave trade was not abolished in the nation’s capital until 1850, as part of the Compromise of 1850. Mary Beth Corrigan, “Imaginary Cruelties? A History of the Slave Trade in Washington, D.C.,” *Washington History* 13 (Fall/Winter, 2001/2002): 21; John M. McFaul, “Expediency vs. Morality: Jacksonian Politics and Slavery,” *Journal of American History* 62 (June 1975): 24–39; Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, I: 351; Evelyn C. Fink, “Representation by Deliberation,” *Journal of Politics* 62 (November 2000): 1109–25. McPherson highlights antislavery Whigs’ role in fighting the Gag Rule during the 27th Congress as a harbinger of the destruction of that party, and the rise of a new coalition that later became the Republican Party. James M. McPherson, “The Fight against the Gag Rule: Joshua Leavitt and Antislavery

His introduction of the “Spot Resolutions,” the proposal to end the slave trade in Washington, D.C., efforts to elect Zachary Taylor to the presidency, and votes on significant issues all leave behind a useful record of Lincoln’s attitude toward slavery, expansion, the Whig Party, and the South from 1847 to 1849.⁷ While these actions all serve as vital indications of Lincoln’s own convictions, however, they serve little purpose in addressing his evolving conception of slavery and the southerner. As a northwesterner whose family had migrated from the slaveholding state of Kentucky to the free soil of the Northwest, the discussions of representatives from across the Union provided a new perspective on the region from whence Lincoln came. That Lincoln did not choose to speak in regard to the Wilmot Proviso, the Northwest Ordinance, or the slavery issue in general does not mean these subjects were of less significance to him. Rather, their frequent recurrence in congressional discussions and statements suggests that Lincoln was forced to personally and professionally grapple with their import during his brief period in Washington, D.C.⁸

Although the *Congressional Globe* remains the most useful guide to understanding the issues and discussions Lincoln encountered during his single term in Congress, it does not provide a comprehensive summary of Lincoln’s experiences in Washington, D.C. As Rachel Sheldon has pointed out, congressmen were often “less than attentive,” engaging in other activities while colleagues spoke on the floor. They also frequently edited their own speeches prior to publication in the *Globe*’s accompanying

Insurgency in the Whig Party, 1839–1842,” *Journal of Negro History* 48 (July 1963): 194. John Quincy Adams, who had long led the fight against the Gag Rule, died on February 23, 1848. *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 381, 384.

⁷ See Paul Findley, *A. Lincoln: The Crucible of Congress* (Fairfield, Calif.: James Stevenson Publisher, 2004); Donald Wayne Riddle, *Congressman Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957); and Donald, *Lincoln*, 123–25.

⁸ David Donald explains that Lincoln declined to speak upon the Wilmot Proviso in the House, but voted in favor of the Proviso repeatedly. Donald, *Lincoln*, 134–35.

*Appendix.*⁹ This relatively bare record of transactions does not reveal the many experiences and encounters Lincoln had outside the halls of Congress. The freshman congressman engaged in countless conversations as a temporary resident at Mrs. Sprigg's boardinghouse, as a member of the Young Indians, a Whig club organized to elect Zachary Taylor, and as a generally sociable and politically ambitious individual. In particular, Lincoln's proposal to end the slave trade in the nation's capital, devised after multiple conversations with his colleagues outside the halls of Congress and his participation in the Young Indians, clearly show that life beyond the House chamber played a significant role in his political development. The little that can be gleaned from the relationships Lincoln built and the conversations he participated in outside of his time in the House are necessary to any study of Lincoln's perception of the South during this period.¹⁰

Several Whig colleagues resided at the same boardinghouse throughout Lincoln's term, leading Lincoln to frequently associate with Ohioan Joshua Giddings, Pennsylvanians Abraham McIlvane, James Pollock, and John Blanchard, and Mississippian Jacob Thompson.¹¹ In early 1848 Lincoln joined a group called the Young Indians organized to support the presidential candidacy of Zachary Taylor in that year's national election. Composed of five southerners and two northerners (including Lincoln), the Young Indian Club regularly met outside of Congress and proved influential in

⁹ Rachel Aliyah Shelden, "Washington Brotherhood: Friendship, Politics, and the Coming of the Civil War" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2011), 35, 5, 46, 48.

¹⁰ Key discussions often took place "in political and social clubs, at dinner parties, in chats among desk-mates and in Capitol antechambers. They happened in boardinghouses and hotels, in drinking rooms and gambling dens, and even in the rooms of the Supreme Court." Shelden, "Washington Brotherhood," 66.

¹¹ Findley, *A. Lincoln*, 85.

gathering momentum for “Rough and Ready’s” candidacy and election.¹² Working with these fellow Whigs brought the northwesterner closer together with northeastern and southern congressmen, and Lincoln praised the Whig efforts of Alexander H. Stephens, who in winter 1848 “concluded the very best speech, of an hour’s length, I ever heard.”¹³

Exchanges and conversations with colleagues, whether Whig or Democrat, must have occurred frequently, though little record of them survive. One particular letter Lincoln wrote to Josephus Hewett on February 13, 1848, reminds us that although Lincoln certainly did gain a new perspective in Washington, D.C, his familiarity with northerners and southerners had deep roots in his experiences as a northwesterner. Thus he was able to write Hewett, a former resident of Springfield, Illinois, who had removed to Natchez, Mississippi, that your “Whig representative from Mississippi, P. W. Tompkins, has just shown me a letter of yours to him.” Accustomed to conversing freely in Illinois on political issues with southerners as well as northerners, and Democrats as well as Whigs, Lincoln cheerfully referenced to Democrat Hewett his conversation with Southern Democrat John A. Quitman before openly admitting to Hewett his disagreement with him regarding the subject of presidential electors.¹⁴

¹² Lincoln became active in the Club at least as early as February 1848, when he expressed to Thomas S. Fluornoy his conviction that Taylor must be the Whig nominee. Abraham Lincoln to Thomas S. Fluornoy, February 17, 1848. Available at *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.: American Memory Project, [2000-02]), <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/alhome.html>, accessed October 14, 2012 (hereafter abbreviated LC). Silbey, *Party over Section*, 56–57; Rayback, *Free Soil*, 38; Shelden, “Washington Brotherhood,” 73, 76.

¹³ Abraham Lincoln to William Herndon, February 2, 1848, LC. Rachel Shelden highlights this remark as an instance of the admiration the Young Indians soon felt for one another, as they worked together on the Taylor campaign. Shelden, “Washington Brotherhood,” 79–80. Riddle argues Lincoln’s affiliation with southern Whigs was natural for him, stemming directly from his interactions with Kentuckians and other southerners in Illinois. Riddle, *Congressman Abraham Lincoln*, 17.

¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln to Josephus Hewett, February 13, 1848, LC. In this critical respect, Lincoln’s position as a northwesterner, a resident of central Illinois, prepared him for the intersectional and interparty associations he would make in the U.S. Congress.

Extra-congressional discussions also led Lincoln to formulate a proposal to eliminate slavery in Washington, D.C. After meetings with his fellow boarders at Mrs. Sprigg's house, most notably ardent antislavery radical Joshua Giddings, Lincoln gave notice during the second session of Congress that he would ask "to introduce a bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, by consent of the free white people of said District, and with compensation to owners." Though Lincoln's proposal had incorporated the views of northerners and southerners alike, the support for his bill apparently evaporated once he planned to introduce it, and his work to abolish slavery in the nation's capital came to naught.¹⁵ Thus, through involvement in the frequently recurring issue of the slave trade and slavery in D.C., Lincoln learned that abolition—even a very gradual emancipation—would be difficult to accomplish anywhere and by any means.¹⁶

Despite the many instances when Lincoln surely gathered particular ideas about the South while walking about Washington, D.C. or engaging in conversations outside of the House, as a freshman congressman inserting himself into Washington life for the first time, Lincoln still gained most of his experience and exposure in the House chamber itself. Thus, the *Globe* still provides the best record of what Lincoln encountered during his time in the nation's capital that specifically influenced his views of the South. Lincoln's extraordinarily high attendance record and involvement indicates an acute attentiveness to the issues discussed during his term. Meanwhile, his affinity for reading and eagerness to communicate with constituents in Illinois led him to pay special

¹⁵ Lincoln also claimed that "fifteen of the leading citizens of the District of Columbia" had approved his proposal. *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess., 212. He surely took into consideration the opinions he had heard voiced in Congress on the matter since his first session of Congress. Even popular sovereignty Democrats like Dickinson had vocally pledged their support for abolishing at least the slave trade in D.C. *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 645; Findley, *A. Lincoln*, 139; Donald, *Lincoln*, 136–37; Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 57–58.

¹⁶ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd Sess., 244.

attention to the published *Globe*.¹⁷ Furthermore, while Lincoln did, as a result of after-hours conversations with fellow congressmen, indeed compose legislation pertaining to slavery in Washington, D.C., in his spare time, he also chose to submit such resolutions based upon House events. He was undoubtedly encouraged to propose abolishing the slave trade in the district by the fact that discussion of this specific topic and of slavery in general had become much more commonplace in the House by mid-1848. As a frequent attendee, Lincoln witnessed these and other important debates of the antebellum era.

The arguments, speeches, and comments he heard his fellow legislators expound upon during his two sessions greatly influenced his conception of the South, particularly in relation to the Northwest in which he had grown up, matured, and thrived. After the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed on May 30, 1854, Lincoln made speeches throughout the northwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, reiterating the Northwest Ordinance's significance in way he had never before publicly expressed. From 1854 to 1860, he pointed to the Northwest as "a section of country whose career in prosperity has no parallel," because of the exclusion of slavery included in the ordinance. These statements derived in part from Lincoln's familiarity with the vast number of southerners who had moved to the Northwest in search of free soil. However, the great importance he attributed to the Northwest Ordinance in the 1850s also stemmed largely from the arguments he heard concerning that ordinance during his single term in Congress. Not until popular sovereignty posed a threat to freedom in the Kansas-Nebraska Act did

¹⁷ Paul Findley, Donald Wayne Riddle, and David Herbert Donald mention Lincoln's glowing attendance record, with Donald remarking that of the "456 roll-call votes during his two years of service, he missed only 13." Findley, *A. Lincoln*, 167–68; Riddle, *Congressman Abraham Lincoln*, 70–71; Donald, *Lincoln*, 121. Findley, *A. Lincoln*, 100, notes that Lincoln sent the *Globe* "to Billy Herndon and other friends back in Illinois." David Donald explains that Lincoln purchased at least 7,580 copies of the *Globe*, which he painstakingly addressed and franked in his own hand—far more than most of the other members of the Congress." Donald, *Lincoln*, 121; Abraham Lincoln to William H. Herndon, December 12, 1847, LC.

Lincoln utter public statements granting the ordinance such power, and highlighting Thomas Jefferson's role as its architect. These opinions sprung from the congressional discussions that consumed Lincoln's time in the national legislature.¹⁸

The 30th Congress, while still governed as much by party divisions as sectional ones, was forced to constantly re-address the slavery problem in the aftermath of the Wilmot Proviso. Late in the session Tennessean Washington Barrow remarked that a "strange spectacle has been presented in this House during the present session. It has been ordinarily the case in the history of parties in this country, that those who professed to coincide in opinion with an existing Administration were found ready to support its recommendations," but now, a "large portion, if not a majority, of the Democratic party arrayed [itself] in opposition to the...Administration."¹⁹ David Wilmot, the Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania who had proposed a proviso keeping slavery out of all territories acquired from Mexico, explained the change in the hall as a direct result of his proposal. "[M]en are denounced, proscribed, read out of the party, for no other offence than demanding that the free soil of the country shall be preserved for freemen," he lamented.²⁰ Wilmot and John Wentworth, both northern Democrats, argued that they supported the Proviso not as a sectional measure but as a Democratic one.²¹ "We have heard for the last year," Wilmot stated in the House, that the Proviso "was a firebrand thrown into the ranks of the Democratic party, which is likely to divide, and perhaps eventually to result in the defeat of that party." No matter how forcefully he urged that his legislation had been crafted in the interest of the "laboring, toiling [white] masses"

¹⁸ *CW*, II: 235.

¹⁹ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 979.

²⁰ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 307.

²¹ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess., 549.

who “bear the load in silence, because they have no pensioned presses to utter their grievances,” the absolute intractability of the South in its resistance to the Proviso ultimately divided the country along sectional lines. Throughout Lincoln’s term, he watched some northerners and southerners clash over the issue of slavery, while others pledged to alleviate sectional tension through the moderate principle of popular sovereignty. Regardless of the stance congressmen chose, the Wilmot Proviso redefined the political atmosphere in Congress. When the Whigs announced Zachary Taylor as their candidate for president in 1848, the nominee’s ambiguous position in regard to the Proviso unhinged Whigs and Democrats alike, resulting in numerous House speeches and arguments that focused less on legislation at hand than on deriding, chiding, or defending Taylor’s apparent unwillingness to decide for or against the prohibition of slavery.²² Even those like Michigander Lewis Cass who, unwilling to isolate North or South, embraced the popular sovereignty principle, could not escape the Proviso. As Richard W. Thompson of Indiana explained, these men did not present a moderate alternative but were simply “on both sides of the Wilmot proviso.”²³

Although Lincoln clearly must have felt the impact of the Wilmot Proviso on national politics, his attention surely would have been most piqued when the debates over the Proviso began revolving around a piece of legislation that had shaped his own life—the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Very early in the session, representatives began characterizing Wilmot’s piece of legislation as “the reenactment of the ordinance of 1787.” Criticizing Zachary Taylor’s lack of any real position on the issue of slavery’s

²² Examples of these speeches abound in the *Congressional Globe*, and do not stem from radicals like Robert Barnwell Rhett or Joshua Giddings, alone. *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 242, 395. As Thomas Henley of Indiana declared to Giddings, the nation demanded that Taylor “must proclaim himself to be either for or against the Wilmot proviso.” *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 396.

²³ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 304, 306, 415.

extension, Joshua Giddings equated the Ordinance and the Proviso as one and the same. This abolitionist firebrand from Ohio was one of the first to use Jefferson's words in support of the Wilmot Proviso, pointing his fellow congressmen "to a very powerful anti-slavery paper, drawn up by one THOMAS JEFFERSON, in 1776," and connecting the words of the Declaration of Independence to the moral antislavery principle he beheld in the Northwest Ordinance.²⁴ David Wilmot himself provided one of the best summations of the Proviso's connection to the principles of 1787. Considering that "territory lying northwest of the Ohio river...the great heritage of our people," Thomas Jefferson, in Wilmot's eyes "the great apostle of our faith," had submitted a resolution declaring that "there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude" in any of the states formed out of that territory. "This, sir, looks very much like the 'Proviso.'" Pointing to Jefferson's efforts against the destructive influence of slavery in the Northwest, Wilmot asserted: "Here is the original '*firebrand*'—the heresy, for holding on to which men are now proscribed by the Government of their country. Mr. Jefferson, had he lived at this day, would have been denounced as an abolitionist, and a disturber of the peace of the Union."²⁵

In his retelling of the Northwest Ordinance's history, Wilmot exaggerated Jefferson's role in the process of effectively passing the ordinance and also incorrectly cast early republican southerners as unanimously opposed to slavery's extension simply because the legislation "was passed by the unanimous vote of the slaveholding States." No mention was made of the Southwest and of that territory's organization in 1790 without the antislavery prohibition. Nevertheless, many northern congressman followed

²⁴ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 213, 383, 523.

²⁵ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1077.

Wilmot by invoking Jefferson and his “wisdom and patriotism” in creating the restriction in 1784 and claiming that this measure was largely responsible for “such high honor” the people conferred “upon the name of the illustrious Jefferson.” Since Jefferson hailed from the southern state of Virginia, northern congressmen frequently reasserted Wilmot’s claim that the South had once endorsed the Northwest Ordinance as a wise edict to advance the best interest of the American nation. Hannibal Hamlin of Maine noted Virginia’s particular role in enacting the Ordinance, praising the state’s cession of the northwestern lands to the federal government, and venerating “Thomas Jefferson, the patriot, statesman, and sage” who “was the originator of the principle in that ordinance which excluded slavery from that territory.” Connecting Jefferson’s decision in 1784 to the political movements of 1848, Hamlin claimed: “Nay, it went further; it abolished slavery there and made it free soil.”²⁶

New York representative Harvey Putnam asked southerners who resisted the extension of the Northwest Ordinance prohibition into the territories acquired from Mexico “if Mr. Jefferson and others were mistaken in their views?” Indianan George Dunn remarked that the 1787 Ordinance, “with the restriction, passed, receiving every vote (except one, Mr. Yates, of New York) of every State represented, to wit: Massachusetts, (then the only non-slaveholding State,) New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.” Besides the obvious conclusion that these states supported a restriction upon slavery, “It is well known that this met Mr. Jefferson’s hearty approbation.” This depiction of the Northwest Ordinance as a Jeffersonian document clearly resonated beyond the halls of Congress, as indicated in a petition presented in Congress by “William Russiter and 33 other citizens of the

²⁶ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 678, 1108, 1147.

borough of Norristown, Pennsylvania, asking that the Jeffersonian ordinance of 1787, prohibiting slavery, may be ingrafted on any law which may be passed organizing Territorial Governments for New Mexico and California.”²⁷

Speaking before their colleagues in 1848, northern congressmen cast the Wilmot Proviso as a mere continuation of the fundamental principle Jefferson and the South had endorsed with the Ordinance of 1787. As voiced by Hoosier representative George D. Dunn, the question they posed to southerners was: “Who follows Mr. Jefferson?” If the country had unanimously endorsed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, northern representatives argued, those who refused to back the Wilmot Proviso clearly resisted the principles that formed one of the nation’s most cherished founding documents. That Lincoln did not engage in the congressional wrangling over slavery and the Northwest Ordinance does not mean that they bore less significance to his own views on slavery and antislavery politics. Ten years later, as he debated Stephen Douglas on the merits of popular sovereignty, he utilized many of the arguments he heard from 1846 to 1848.²⁸

Though these northern queries appear to outnumber southern responses, those in Congress who hailed from the South offered an alternative interpretation of the Ordinance and Jefferson’s role in crafting it. Thomas Bayly of Virginia claimed “that ordinance originated in a palpable usurpation of power by the Congress of 1787. The articles of confederation,” under which it had initially been adopted, “conferred upon Congress no such power.” Far from mandating that slavery must not exist in the states

²⁷ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1124, 969; *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd Sess., 189.

²⁸ Lincoln gave precedence to Thomas Jefferson’s role not only in crafting the Declaration of Independence, but also in prohibiting slavery from the Northwest Territory. His great Peoria address of 1854 claimed the Virginian “foresaw and intended” the Northwest as “the happy home of teeming millions of free, white, prosperous people,” with “no slave amongst them.” *CW*, II: 249. He also invoked Jefferson against Douglas in their third debate, at Jonesboro, Illinois. *CW*, III: 124; George Anastaplo, *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 172.

formed out of the Northwest Territory, Bayly argued, Jefferson and the other Virginian authors had ceded those extended Virginian lands to the U.S through a “charter of compact” that guaranteed settlers the right to self-government, including whatever decision they might make in regard to slavery, once they applied for statehood.²⁹

The Wilmot Proviso had indeed opened Pandora’s Box, and congressmen resurrected this topic of the expansion of the Northwest Ordinance at every opportunity. The following interchange between several congressmen offers one example of representatives’ tendency to inject the extension of the Northwest Ordinance into House debates on other topics. As the House considered a set of resolutions on April 3, 1848, declaring the United States in favor of the recent French revolutions, congressman George Ashmun of Massachusetts proposed the following as an amendment to one of the resolutions: “And we especially see an encouraging earnest of their success in the decree which pledges the said Government of France to early measures for the immediate emancipation of all slaves in their colonies.” To this Congressman Schench offered a further addition: “Recognizing as we do that cardinal republican principle that there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except for crime,” which Ashmun concurred in.³⁰ A vigorous debate ensued over the introduction of this amendment, in which most of the speakers, North and South, declared the reference to slavery both unnecessary and disruptive.

The remarks of Joshua Giddings, Thomas Bayly, William Haskell of Tennessee, and New Yorker William Duer are of particular note, since all four adopted different

²⁹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 574. Leonard Richards describes the turn Van Buren Democrats took toward embracing Thomas Jefferson. They celebrated him as “author of the Declaration of Independence” and emphasized the “prohibition of slavery in the Old Northwest in 1787” in their local gatherings and “Jefferson Committees.” Richards, *Slave Power*, 159.

³⁰ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 572.

approaches to the question of prohibiting slavery in the territories. Giddings and Bayly represented the more radical positions taken by North and South, respectively, with Haskell and Duer occupying more moderate ground and attempting to settle the issue without lengthy dispute. These four thus represent the positions of the radical and the moderate in both North and South.³¹ “The people of the South did not complain if the balance of the world saw fit to abolish slavery within their own jurisdictions,” the Tennessean explained. “As a southern man, as a slaveholder, he could stand by and cheerfully see Kentucky abolish slavery within her limits. What the South complained of, was not that other people were endeavoring to ameliorate their condition, to abolish slavery if they saw fit, but of the unnecessary interference of other people with them.” Haskell disclaimed radicalism and castigated those congressmen “who were continually introducing this subject of slavery,” which was “calculated to produce disunion in this Hall...and put out this light of freedom towards which with hope we turned the eyes of the downtrodden world.” Congressman Duer adopted a similar stance, admitting that he admired the “moral courage” of abolitionists in the House yet could not support such an amendment. His extreme antipathy to slavery, he explained, remained “wholly unattended by any personal feeling of ill will toward slaveholders.” Thus, while “he did most sincerely rejoice to learn that it had been abolished in the colonies of France...he could not but regret its introduction on the present occasion as unnecessary and uncalled for.”³²

³¹ These congressmen’s positions give a sense of northern and southern responses to sectionalism in 1848. David Potter alternatively utilizes the four viewpoints of David Wilmot, James Buchanan, Lewis Cass, and John C. Calhoun to precisely nail down the four major political positions “put forward within sixteen months after the territorial question reemerged to prominence in 1846.” Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 54.

³² *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 574–75, 577.

As much as these men tried to temper such outbursts of sectional hostility among northerners and southerners following the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso, the more radical members of Congress often inflamed the debate. In response to Haskell's moderate remarks, Giddings announced that he was proud to hear Haskell in favor of abolition (which, of course, Haskell did not support). When Haskell further explained to the Ohio congressman that southerners simply "desired those who held slaves to set for themselves, without exterior interference, and to abolish them for themselves, if they pleased to do so, and the South would not complain," Giddings declared that the "conversion of the South on the subject of slavery was absolutely more sudden than that of St. Paul." Giddings's sarcastic chidings provoked the southwestern moderate into defensively posturing that he "hoped the gentleman from Ohio did not understand him to be a *quasi* abolitionist, nor a half-way slavery man. He believed the institution of slavery to be of divine origin, and that God in his wisdom had made negroes for the benefit of white men." Nevertheless, that belief did not make it right for him to impose it upon others, even if neighboring states chose to abolish slavery within their own borders.³³

Bayly needed no prodding to adopt a more radical stance. He denounced the "effort which was made to seize this occasion, which ought to be one of national rejoicing, and turn it into one of domestic discord," but he did not proceed upon the moderate grounds assumed by Haskell and Duer. He placed blame directly on Giddings and "his coadjutors," Ashmun and Schenck, for supporting the amendment, then proceeded to debate Giddings over the history of emancipation in the United States. When Giddings brought up the ordinance of 1787 as proof of the Founders' support for abolition, Bayly responded that "the ordinance of 1787, as far as slavery was concerned,

³³ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 577.

was treated practically as a nullity. It never had any legal force in the Northwestern Territory.”³⁴

Throughout this extended discussion over a set of resolutions to recognize French liberty, Lincoln witnessed the pervasive controversial quality of the Wilmot Proviso, the paralyzing and divisive effects of radicalism on the slavery issue, and the gradual sectionalization of politics. To be sure, though congressmen often jumped at the opportunity to resurrect or extend debate over slavery’s extension, issues surrounding topics such as internal improvements, land grants, U.S. troop benefits, and the annual budget still commanded the majority of the House’s attention. Nevertheless, the perpetuation of Wilmot’s Proviso as a lightning rod and, more importantly, the frequency with which members debated the validity and legacy of the Northwest Ordinance, surely gave Lincoln pause. Perhaps he had never comprehensively considered the power of that early Ordinance in eliminating slavery; or, perhaps from his experiences in Illinois, he had already formed his own opinions in regard to that document. Regardless, the statements Lincoln heard throughout his Congressional term must have developed or strengthened the conviction he later expressed, that the Northwest Ordinance had been crucial to preserving his state against the creeping influence of slavery. Exposed to this idea over and over again in Washington, D.C., in his detachment from those southern migrants with whom he had settled in central Illinois, Lincoln formed a mental map of migration and slavery in the United States. This cognizance poured forth in his speeches throughout Illinois during the 1850s, displaying itself in cities like Cincinnati, where

³⁴ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 577–78.

Lincoln retold the history of the Northwest Territory to a crowd of Kentuckians and Ohioans.³⁵

New York congressman William Collins believed that with the acquisition of territories, “the passage of an act of Congress is desired, containing the anti-slavery provision of the 6th section of the ordinance of 1787, known as the ‘Proviso.’” The introduction of slavery in new territories, he alleged, would bar white northern laborers from the new lands, while “to prohibit it, would not exclude the same class from the South.” As evidence that the Wilmot Proviso should be enacted, Collins pointed to the effects of the Northwest Ordinance. “The honorable member from Maine [Ephraim Smart] has shown that more than one-half the population of Indiana and Illinois emigrated from the slave States.” The restriction upon slavery thus encouraged greater, not less, migration into U.S. territories.³⁶

On March 28, 1848, Ephraim Smart had introduced a set of resolutions by his state’s legislature declaring slavery “a moral and social evil” that must be prohibited from entering newly acquired territories. As expressed in those resolutions, the state of Maine believed it “the duty of the General Government to extend over the same the ordinance of 1787, with all its rights and privileges, conditions and immunities.” Declaring himself in accord with these resolutions, Smart explained that “I have thus far spoken of this question as if Southern men had no interest in free territory; but I believe they have a deep interest in its preservation.” In the Northwest, upon the lands that had been set aside for freedom in 1787, “may be found at this moment an immense population that

³⁵ Lincoln informed the crowd that the Northwest Ordinance had prevented Indiana from becoming a slave state, and then pointed to the adjacent states of Illinois and Missouri as a prime example of the Ordinance’s effectiveness in prohibiting slavery. Wright, *Lincoln and the Politics of Slavery*, 160–61.

³⁶ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 920, 923.

originated in the slaveholding States. The free States formed out of the ‘Northwest Territory’ are an asylum for the free white men of the South.” In support of this assertion, which posed a great problem to southerners who claimed slavery proved beneficial to the nonslaveholder as well as the slaveholder, Smart read aloud two letters: one from the Secretary of State of Indiana and the other from the Secretary of State of Illinois. The Indianan first described his own background, explaining that ““I am from a slaveholding State, (Kentucky,) and have resided in the Territory and State of Indiana near forty years.”” He then proceeded to estimate the number of inhabitants of Indiana at about 900,000 and claimed “more than one-half that number are from the slaveholding States. This may be wide of the mark, one way or the other, as it is but conjecture. My own opinion is, however, that I have not stated the inhabitants from the slaveholding States as many as they are.””³⁷

Smart then informed Congress that he had “an extract of a letter from the Secretary of State of Illinois, which I wish to put on record as an additional evidence of the common enjoyment of the free territory of the West by the people of the North and South.” This official had similarly admitted that he had no exact data regarding the relative proportion of northerners and southerners in the state, but after asking the Governor and ex-Governor, estimated ““that about one-half of the present citizens of this State who have come from other States, originated in the slaveholding States.”” In case the statements of two state officials in the Northwest did not sway his colleagues, Smart referred to “*Southern testimony*” given by Thomas Clingman, of North Carolina, in a speech recorded in the Appendix of the *Globe*. Though Clingman had declined from going so far as to denounce the institution of slavery, he nevertheless admitted that “a

³⁷ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 545.

very large portion of the emigration of the old Southern States goes into the free States of the Northwest. This, as I have observed myself, is eminently true of the North Carolina emigrants.” Reiterating that quote within the context of his discussion, Smart pointed out that “the South” did not simply constitute slaveholders and their slaves but also numerous white nonslaveholders who, historically, had often chosen the free Northwest over the slave South or Southwest. Prohibiting slavery in acquired territories, then, would make them into “an asylum for the poor but enterprising men of both sections of the Union. Thus far I can see no injustice to the South in securing freedom to the territory we acquire.”³⁸

Smart would continue to raise this point in congressional discussions over resolutions related to the territories acquired by the U.S. after the Mexican War. In the second session of the 30th Congress, he reminded his fellow representatives that even in his own references to the extent of the territories, “I have assumed that the eight millions of people in the South are all interested in slavery, while it is a fact that not over three hundred thousand have any pecuniary interest in slaves.” In addition to pure economic self-interest, he argued, that fact was sustained by the actions of the nonslaveholding southerners, who “constantly emigrate from choice to such [free] territory in great numbers.” As further proof that that was the case, he provided a chart from the War Department listing the locations of the land warrants that Mexican War veterans chose in reward for their services. The total number of warrants sold in the states of the Northwest Territory plus Iowa, versus the amount sold in the western and southwestern states of Missouri, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Florida, stood at 10,159 to

³⁸ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 547, 45, 547.

1,750. Surely, Smart reasoned, “[m]ore than 1,700 of these 12,000 men must have belonged to the South.”³⁹

Smart also furnished further statistics that compared the populations and economic production of the free states and slave states and indicated that both factors were much higher in the free states. The conclusion that Smart gathered from all these sources was not simply that nonslaveholders preferred free states and thrived in them, but that Congress must take direct action to legislate against slavery even in those states where it was believed slavery could not exist. “[I]f slavery can exist in Virginia for hundreds of years, why can it not exist upon such a soil as these extracts describe? Sir, the man who relies upon soil and climate to keep slavery out of these Territories, in my opinion, has not informed himself in relation to them, or is willing that it should go in.” Popular sovereignty, he thereby asserted, would not keep slavery out of the territories; only federal legislation would effectively do so.⁴⁰

Smart was one of several congressman who centered on the volume of migration from the South to the Northwest as proof that slavery was, indeed, a social evil. John G. Palfrey of Massachusetts likewise brought up Clingman’s admission that North Carolina had lost much of her population to the free Northwest. He asked, “what is it that sets the prodigious current of emigration so determinately in that direction, winning even the sons of the sunny South from the homes of their childhood and the graves of their fathers, and all the associations of kindred and of memory, to seek the hardships of an untried condition and a northern sky?” Something very important must have lured them away, Palfrey reasoned—“Just the intense desire for that equality, and those social advantages,

³⁹ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd Sess., 352.

⁴⁰ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd Sess., 353.

which the presence of slavery absolutely excludes.” Palfrey then extended his discussion beyond the short reaches of North Carolina, pointing to Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky as states from whence the masses of non-slaveholders fled in search of land devoid of slavery. Clearly, a great swell of anti-slavery sentiment existed amongst the southern nonslaveholding population.⁴¹

Whether Lincoln had before pondered the influx of southerners into the states of his upbringing and adulthood, these statements voiced throughout his term would have struck him a familiar chord because of his own family’s journey from slave territory, and the very similar travels undertaken by friends and neighbors. More importantly, congressmen did not stop at the recognition that vast numbers of southerners chose to migrate to the free Northwest rather than remain in the South or settle in the Southwest. Rather, these simple observations generated much larger, more detailed comparisons between Northwest and South, free territory and slave. These comparisons further adjusted Lincoln’s mental map of migration and slavery and supported his existing sense that slavery tended to limit the freedom and opportunity of nonslaveholders.

Charles Hudson of Massachusetts, another congressman who addressed the issue, declared that a simple “comparison of Kentucky with Ohio will show the advantage of free over slave labor.” He drew upon the observations of former congressman Kenneth Rayner, of North Carolina, who cautioned that anyone who travelled in the South would “see the very soil, consecrated by having been the battle grounds of the Revolution, being fast converted into its original waste...He will see the remnants of mansions, once the abode of refinement and gayety, now tumbling into desolation and ruin.” Rayner had not explicitly attributed these effects to slavery but remarked that their former inhabitants had

⁴¹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 135.

“all gone to the far West.” Virginia’s “natural advantages, superior in many respects to theirs” in the Northwest, explained Ashmun, were nullified by the stultifying effects of slavery. “Had it been possible, at the time that ordinance was passed, to rid Virginia of her slave population and place her in that respect on a footing with the northwestern States, her progress might at this time have been as rapid as theirs.” Since slavery had continued there without interruption, her citizens fled while her lands deteriorated.⁴² Since 1787 when the nation’s “fathers abolished slavery, and devoted the whole northwest region to freedom,” that section of the nation acted as a standard against which Americans judged the effects of slavery in the slave states. E.B. Holmes of New York claimed that after just a half century, “that whole country stands out in bold relief, in striking contrast, in all the elements of national greatness, with that portion of the old thirteen smitten with the blights of slavery.” Putnam provocatively urged his fellow congressmen to “[l]ook at the intelligence of the masses of the people” and to “compare the new States formed from the Northwestern Territory, where the first anti-slavery proviso was adopted, with an equal amount of contiguous slave territory.”⁴³

Harvey Putnam, like Hudson and other northern congressmen, drew from southern sources to legitimate his arguments against slavery. Reciting the 1832 remarks of William H. Broadmax in the Virginia House of Delegates, he sought to show southerners in 1848 that slavery must be kept out of the territories acquired from Mexico. Broadmax had boldly stated: “‘That *slavery in Virginia is an evil*, and a transcendent evil, it would be idle, and more than idle, for any human being to doubt or deny. It is a mildew which has blighted in its course every region it has touched, from the creation of the

⁴² *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 666; *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 600.

⁴³ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1114.

world.” Broadmax then lamented the particular effects of the institution upon his own state.

That Virginia—originally the first-rated State in the Union—the one which, in better days, led the councils and dictated the measures of the Federal Government, had been gradually *razed* to the condition of a third-rate State, and was destined soon to yield precedence to another, among the youngest of her daughters; that many of the finest portions, originally, of her territory, now (as was so glowingly depicted the other day) exhibited scenes of wide-spread desolation and decay; that many of her most valuable citizens are removing to other parts of the world—have certainly been attributed to a variety of causes; but who can doubt that it is principally *slavery* that is at the bottom of all—that this is the *incubus* which paralyzes her energies and rewards her every effort at advancement?⁴⁴

Kingsley S. Bingham of Michigan utilized statistics given by “Professor [Nathaniel Beverly] Tucker, of the University of Virginia, in regard to the relative population of the free and slave States, and their relative increase.” Tucker had found that while about seven million people inhabited the slave states in 1840, nearly ten million had settled upon free territory. “Mr. Speaker,” Bingham continued, “it is my good fortune to represent on this floor a portion of the Northwest Territory redeemed from the curse of slavery by the wise and sagacious provisions of the Jeffersonian ordinance of 1787.” Highlighting the astonishing growth of his section of the Union, he pointed out in 1800, “that whole Northwest Territory contained but 50,240 people, and had no Representative on this floor. In forty years, her population had increased to 3,000,000! Five States in this

⁴⁴ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1124.

Confederacy have been formed out of her, and she has now forty-two Representatives on this floor.”⁴⁵

New Yorker S. Lawrence praised the Ordinance and the West from his vantage point in the Northeast, asking, “Who that has ever passed down the Ohio [river] has not been struck with astonishment at the difference between the appearance of a slave country on one side, and a free population on the other?” After quoting Jefferson’s criticisms of slavery, Lawrence restated part of an address that Virginia slaveholders had recently published. The Virginians had chosen to make their own comparison of the old free states and old slave states, noticeably leaving out any study of the Northwest or Southwest, and instead studying Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia against New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. They concluded: “It is in the last period of ten years, from 1838 to 1848, that this consuming plague of slavery has shown its worst effects in the old Southern States.” While the South had gained only 7.5 percent more inhabitants, New England had increased 15 percent, and the “middle states” an entire 26 percent. Rhetorically asking “[w]hat has done this work of desolation?” they responded: “Not war, nor pestilence, not oppression of rulers, civil or ecclesiastical, but *slavery*—a curse more destructive in its effects than any of them.” Lawrence also quoted from a Virginian who claimed the state generally supported emancipation, contrary to popular belief. “It is not generally known, yet it is nevertheless true, that two-thirds of the people of Virginia are open and undisguised advocates of ridding the State of slavery,” this writer alleged. “We have, within the last two years, conversed with more than five hundred slaveholders in the State, and four hundred and fifty out of the five hundred have expressed themselves ready to unite upon a general plan to abolish slavery upon almost

⁴⁵ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1109.

any terms.” From these statements, in combination with southern opinions most often voiced in Congress, Lincoln may have understood Lawrence’s sources to fit squarely within the popular opinion of much of the South. While perhaps the one writer’s contention that 450 out of 500 slaveholders supported emancipation appeared vastly inflated, Lincoln nonetheless would likely have applied these very same expressions to the white nonslaveholders who had not (or not yet) migrated away from slavery. After all, that characterization fit the southern-born migrants he knew in Illinois. Lincoln certainly did not doubt Lawrence’s conclusions that “the present prosperous and happy condition of the great West” proved “the wisdom and patriotism of Jefferson, when he devised and drew up this restriction in 1784, or of his associates, who carried it into effect in 1787.”⁴⁶

Listening to these expressions regarding the Northwest Ordinance from members both North and South, Lincoln re-created his memories of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. He perhaps recalled the opinions and prejudices of those southern migrants whom he knew in Illinois, with whom he had lived and worked, and considered their statements in a new context. A northwesterner temporarily removed to Washington, D.C., he began to perceive the settlement of southerners in his district as an active effort to get away from slavery, whether due to their moral antipathy to the institution or a fear of its economically crippling effects on the white nonslaveholder. As Lincoln considered the testimonies of northerners and southerners connecting migration with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 with the Wilmot Proviso, he developed a conviction that slavery acted against the best interests of the white nonslaveholder, that nonslaveholders in the South knew this fact, and that only federal legislation could guarantee the prohibition of slavery in the West. As Lincoln

⁴⁶ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 680, 687.

contemplated these ideas, he also created a new memory of his ancestors' gradual flight from slavery as the natural process nonslaveholders underwent to find freedom on free soil. Through this lens he interpreted the South's actions and responses in 1848 and beyond.

Unlike northern men, who at times reveled in their ability to provide statistics indicating their state's or region's growth of trade, inhabitants, and output, southerners often displayed a reluctance to gathering, utilizing, and revealing information and opinions. As members of the 30th Congress were most acutely aware, the 21st Rule or "gag rule" had been repealed just four years earlier. This rule had forbidden the presentation of any petitions in the House of Representatives relating to the abolition of slavery—a prohibition that John Quincy Adams and many others believed clearly violated the right to free speech and discussion—for eight years. Many southerners also believed the census had unfairly treated the South by attempting to gather information they considered unnecessary. As Robert Barnwell Rhett alleged on December 15, 1847, "A portion of the people of the South—of Virginia, South Carolina, and other States" had resisted the census takers' requests for information about their property and their slaves, beyond the simple count required for accurate representation in Congress. Rhett opposed the formation of an additional Committee of Commerce, whose duties would include assessing the production of all the individual states, rather than simply the commerce that flowed between the states. As Caleb B. Smith remarked in his response to the congressman, the proposition of gathering such statistics had always incurred the resistance of southern members who knew that particular northern congressmen would

wield that information against slavery—as, indeed, many did.⁴⁷ A similar attitude pervaded reactions to the proposition of printing and binding the report of the Commissioner of Patents. Illinoisan Smith unhesitatingly endorsed this action, since the “agricultural portion of it was carefully read and examined by farmers; to that class of his constituents it was of great value.” While representatives of northern agricultural districts overwhelmingly favored the printing of the patent report, a few key southern leaders denounced it. Alexander Stephens, Robert Toombs, and Robert Rhett, an odd combination of Whig and Democrat, opposed the printing of this information for their constituents, arguing that the “whole matter was in conformity with the course of usurpation by this House,” which tended to overextend its powers. Rhett alleged that the measure was driven by congressmen who desired to win votes rather than serve the best interest of their constituents. “If they were to vote these things—if it was the purpose of Congress to give to members the means of pleasing the people by the donation of information, let them not confine themselves to this document; let them subscribe for works upon agricultural chemistry—let them go to philosophers, those who analyzed the great principles of agriculture, and give their works to the people.”⁴⁸

This mockery of the idea that Congress had a responsibility to provide its constituents with information pertinent to self-improvement must have sounded to Lincoln like a mockery of self-improvement itself—at least for the white yeoman farmer. As a self-improved man who soon thereafter patented his own invention, he would have identified with Smith’s constituents and objected to the arguments given by Rhett, Toombs, and Stephens. Those white laboring classes of the South craved the same

⁴⁷ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 27–29.

⁴⁸ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 480–81, 483.

information, and the same means to improve themselves and their families, as their brethren who had migrated to the Northwest.⁴⁹ From this and other comments in the House, Lincoln gathered the impression that many of the southern representatives in Congress did not adequately represent their constituents' interests or opinions on important subjects. Returning Rhett's rhetoric with his own, Lincoln spoke in favor of utilizing statistics for the benefit of assessing internal improvements and the produce of the nation. "One of the gentlemen from South Carolina....particularly objects, as I understand him, to counting all the pigs and chickens in the land." While "[i]t is true, that if everything be enumerated, a portion of such statistics may not be very useful to this object," Lincoln chided, "[t]he *surplus*, that which is produced in *one* place to be consumed in *another*; the capacity of each locality for producing a *greater* surplus; the natural means of transportation, and their susceptibility of improvement; the hinderances, delays, and losses of life and property during transportation, and the causes of each, would be among the most valuable statistics in this connection." Lincoln perceived only beneficial results from gathering such statistics. Most importantly, they would help the national legislature decide which projects and problems deserved their greatest attention. "[W]hat is made unequal in one place may be equalized in another, extravagance avoided, and the whole country put on that career of prosperity, which shall correspond with its extent of territory, its natural resources, and the intelligence and enterprise of its people."⁵⁰

The protests of particular southern gentlemen did not drown out the more moderate expressions of others. When North Carolina representative Abraham Venable

⁴⁹ The resolution ultimately passed, 117 to 35 (the votes were not recorded). *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 483.

⁵⁰ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 711.

had assured his fellow congressmen that “Southern men and slaveholders have nothing to fear from the full development of the truth,” he spoke to southern and northern men alike, reassuring them that free speech, statistics, and unbiased information did not pose a threat to slavery.⁵¹ Indirect disavowals of southern radicalism by moderate southerners reassured Lincoln that proslavery radicalism did not reign in Congress or in the South. Oddly reassuring, also, was the mere fact that most southern representatives were slaveholders. In a letter Lincoln wrote to Usher F. Linder on March 22, 1848, he argued that the Whigs had been unfairly charged with abolition doctrines. To prove this, he counted up each southern Whig then serving as a representative in the House: “one from Louisiana, one from Mississippi, one from Florida, two from Alabama, four from Georgia, five from Tennessee, six from Kentucky, six from North Carolina, six from Virginia, four from Maryland and one from Delaware.” This amounted to “thirty-seven in all,” he explained, “and all slave-holders, every one of whom votes the commencement of the war ‘unnecessary and unconstitutional’ and so falls subject to your charge of abolitionism!”

Content that he had proved to Linder the absurdity of charging Whigs with abolitionism, Lincoln did not appear to recognize the significance of his own declaration. His perception that all thirty-seven Whigs in the House of Representative were slaveholders not only proved to him that radicalism did not prevail among slaveholders, but also that the South’s representatives did not sufficiently represent the interests of their neighboring white nonslaveholders. When southern congressmen spoke of the South and slavery, they spoke as though each southerner had a direct and immediate interest in

⁵¹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 538.

slavery.⁵² Yet as Lincoln looked about him, he must surely have noticed the stark contrast between these men and the nonslaveholders he had frequently encountered in the Northwest. From his point of view, nonslaveholders did not, could not, have a direct interest in upholding the slave system. The information he had obtained directly from white nonslaveholding southerners in the Northwest had only confirmed that view, and since Lincoln's association with southerners went only as far south as Kentucky, he was not familiar with southern nonslaveholders who may have argued that the institution directly benefited them. Most southerners whom he knew had migrated out of the South and into the Northwest in search of greater opportunity on free soil. The presence of so many southern slaveholders in the national legislature, speaking about the South's interests in slavery as though each and every southerner were a slaveholder, certainly imbued this Lone Star Whig with a sense that the white nonslaveholding southerner remained underrepresented, misunderstood, and ostracized from the higher seats of government.

Remarks such as these by Mississippian Jacob Thompson were common: "You claim the power, and express the determination, to pass the Wilmot proviso over all the vast territory now held by the United States." This act, he accused northern congressmen, would "virtually exclude every Mississippian, with his household, from the occupancy of one solitary acre in all your broad possession."⁵³ Venable of North Carolina attempted to explain away the emigration of the nonslaveholding masses from his state, characterizing their treks as either the "pursuit of a more extended field for the employment of the wealth accumulated there [in North Carolina]" or the product of "increasing families,"

⁵² Morrison, *Democratic Politics*, 60–64 discusses this more widespread belief among northerners, which Lincoln encountered in Congress, that slaveholders dominated southern politics and society.

⁵³ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 719.

which “invite them to the enterprise and advantages of a new country.” Fully acknowledging the outflows described by northerners and southerners alike, Venable struggled to redefine emigration to the South as a favorable process that resulted not from “poverty and distress” but the desire for even greater wealth and opportunity welcomed by the West.⁵⁴

Most southern congressmen, however, acted as though every white southerner was a slaveholder, holding equal interest in the institution. Virginian Thomas Bayly countered Smart’s argument that allowing slavery into the territories prevented masses of Americans from moving there, while prohibiting it limited no one. “Now, sir, I hold that the very reverse of this is true,” Bayly asserted. “Prohibit slavery in a Territory, and in what position do you place a slaveholder who desires to emigrate? Before he goes, he must either sell his slaves, or emancipate them.” Not content to simply characterize the South as land of slaveholders, Bayly also addressed Smart’s claim that “slavery, wherever it exists, degrades labor, and thus the free white laborers of the North are excluded.” The Virginian chided his fellow representatives for this pervasive attitude, which “shows that want of information upon the subject which is always manifested here.” He then offered the southern proslavery argument explaining why the institution benefitted the white nonslaveholder: “In a slave State, the distinctions in society do not grow out of the difference of pursuits, but of condition and color. It is not the fact that the negro labors that degrades him; for let him be as idle as he may, even if he be able to live without work, his social position is still beneath that of the poorest white laborer.” He explained that rich white men and their sons often worked alongside their slaves in the fields, and that white blacksmiths preferred working with black blacksmiths because they

⁵⁴ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd Sess., 578.

could “make him perform menial duties in and about the shop, which they would be reluctant to exact of a white man.” Bayly claimed the white nonslaveholder preferred this slave society to that of the free states, because all menial labor was left to blacks, and the divisions in society created by “color and condition” rather than “wealth and pursuits” meant that the “respectable white laborers in the South are treated with an infinite deal of more courtesy and respect by men of other pursuits, than they are at the North.”⁵⁵

To the son of a former southern nonslaveholder who had moved to the Northwest, this analysis did not ring true. Abraham Lincoln, the self-embodiment of the American idea that one’s destiny was not predetermined by his father’s place in society, never strayed from his belief that a man’s “condition” was never permanent—that it was precisely his “pursuits” which defined him. Over the course of the two sessions of the 30th Congress, Lincoln would learn that many of the wealthier, politically powerful men of the South had become more—not less—wedded to slavery. Slaveholding congressmen claimed to represent the views of their non-slaveholding neighbors in Congress, injecting a variety of proslavery arguments into territorial disputes and offering little explanation of the benefits slavery brought to white non-slaveholders. Lincoln had arrived in Washington, D.C., the unabashed admirer of Henry Clay, who advocated colonization as a means to foster the movement for gradual emancipation and would reiterate his antislavery pledge in the next Congress: “I never can, and never will vote, and no earthly power will ever make me vote, to spread slavery over territory where it does not exist;”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 578–79. Robert E. Bonner discusses the rhetoric of southern elites who defined the South by its attachment to slavery, arguing that “the rights of the South are the rights of the South as slaveholding.” Robert E. Bonner, *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood* (New York and other cities: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72.

⁵⁶ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 126.

The comments of other congressmen gave Lincoln the sense that a dangerous transformation was taking place among southern slaveholders. Northerners and southerners both remarked on this transformation during the 30th Congress. Richard Brodhead of Pennsylvania noted on June 3, 1848, that the South suddenly demanded that Congress take direct action in regard to slavery, after years of advocating the very opposite. “Until within the last few months, the doctrine of non-interference upon the part of the General Government upon the subject of slavery was vehemently enforced by southern statesmen and southern Representatives upon this floor.” During the last session of Congress, “the whole South seemed to be satisfied with the position of neutrality or the Missouri compromise. Now, for the first time in this House, the honorable gentlemen [Mr. Rhett] contends that the legislative power of the General Government should be exerted to protect slavery in the Territories.”⁵⁷

This transition of the South’s position on slavery was partly acknowledged by southern congressmen, who placed the blame for their new stance on northern congressmen who insisted on supporting the Wilmot Proviso. South Carolinian Armistead Burt explained that South Carolina’s representatives had originally voted in favor of the prohibition of slavery contained in the Oregon bill, “because it lay north of the [Missouri] compromise line.” Everything changed, he argued, when “a gentleman from Pennsylvania rose and proposed what had since become so famous as the Wilmot proviso. Then the South took the alarm. At the next session the same proposition was renewed; and the South could no longer doubt the existence of a purpose which had now

⁵⁷ *Appendix of the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 649. Tuck had also acknowledged the South’s newfound embrace of greater federal power to protect slavery earlier in the session. He warned the South: “Do not southern gentlemen perceive that if the power of the General Government may be wielded in defence of their peculiar institution, the time may come when the same power may be invoked to restrain and to suppress it?” *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 199.

become openly manifest to all.”⁵⁸ Texas representative David Kaufman had voted to prohibit slavery in Oregon “because all of Oregon lies north of 36 ½ degrees north latitude, or what is commonly known as the Missouri compromise line.” Because the Missouri compromise line had been applied to Texas’s admission into the Union, he deemed the application of the same principle to Oregon both consistent and fair.

Wilmot’s proviso had violated that compromise, and therefore altered his position on the matter of slavery in Oregon. “I never have voted against slavery in Oregon since the Wilmot proviso was introduced into and passed by this House,” Kaufman declared, and “I never will vote to exclude slavery from Oregon or any other Territory of the United States as long as I see the North determined to force down upon the South the Wilmot proviso.”⁵⁹ As one of the most outspoken members of Congress on the slavery issue, Robert Barnwell Rhett sought to show Congress that his newfound appreciation for Congress’s right to legislate on slavery was embraced by the entire South. On June 1, 1848, he read three resolutions to the House, which had been passed by the states of Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama. These declarations by the state legislatures “contain, I believe, the principles of the South on the important subject to which they relate,” slavery. Rhett therefore offered them as proof that his own words stemmed from the convictions of his southern constituents, who opposed the Wilmot Proviso’s prohibition of slavery. Though each of the three states utilized different words, they all expressed the same sentiment that they would agree to no law that did not recognize “the natural and indefatigable right of each and every citizen of every State of this Confederacy to reside, with his property of whatever description, in any territory which may be acquired by the

⁵⁸ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1013.

⁵⁹ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1013.

arms of the United States or yielded by treaty with any foreign Power.” With these declarations, the three states disavowed the Northwest Ordinance, the Missouri Compromise, and the Wilmot Proviso, insisting that Congress had no right to limit the freedom of slaveholders desiring to migrate to new territories with their slaves. During the second session of the 30th Congress, Daniel Wallace of South Carolina presented resolutions by the legislature of his state expressing its unanimity “with her sister States in resisting the application of the principles of the Wilmot proviso to such territory, at any and every hazard.”⁶⁰

As evidenced by these statements, the Wilmot Proviso had inspired the South to alter its position in regard to slavery in expansion and to castigate the Ordinance of 1787 as “the baneful cause and foundation of all the fearful agitation which now threatens us.” Bayly’s opinion resonated with much of the southern delegation, when he stated: “I regard the Wilmot Proviso as designed to repudiate the Missouri compromise. If that compromise is to operate, [the Proviso] is unnecessary; and gentlemen, in insisting upon it, repudiate the Missouri compromise.”⁶¹ Since the North had abandoned the Missouri compromise, the South would also. Whereas before nearly all of the South would have been satisfied with an extension of the Missouri Compromise line, many southerners now believed the federal government must protect slavery and the right of inhabitants to bring all of their property—including slaves—into any territory. Mississippian Winfield Featherston argued away the Northwest Ordinance as “not applicable to this question arising under the Constitution,” because it had been adopted before the Constitution.

⁶⁰ In 1847, John C. Calhoun had urged southern states to pass such resolutions opposing the Wilmot Proviso. *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 655; *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 519; *Charleston Mercury*, August 11, 1847; Bonner, *Mastering America*, 66.

⁶¹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 962, 578.

Since the Wilmot Proviso rested directly upon this principle, it constituted an invalid assertion of congressional power. Thomas Bocock of Virginia similarly argued that the Ordinance passed, “as Mr. Madison said, ‘without the slightest shadow of constitutional authority’It cannot commit the South to the whole principle contended for; and the Missouri compromise, no more than the ordinance, commits the South to the power claimed for Congress to prohibit slavery.”⁶²

Although the instances of southern congressmen railing against northerners might make the differences between the two sections appear irreconcilable, the moderate position on popular sovereignty seemed to provide some middle ground for the North and the South on the issue of slavery. This doctrine proved especially popular among northwesterners, many of whom believed popular sovereignty more responsible for generating the Northwest’s wealth and success than the Northwest Ordinance. William Sawyer of Ohio announced that “[t]here was a sovereignty existing in the people—he did not care where or in what capacity you found them—whether in a town, a county, or a Territory. Our laws and our Constitution were predicated on the fact that the people had a right to self-government.” Congress, therefore, did not hold the power to decide slavery’s inclusion or exclusion in the territories. Fellow Ohioan Rodolphus Dickinson referred to the Northwest Ordinance, urging that “[h]e did not consider that ordinance binding; it never had been so considered by the people northwest of the Ohio.”⁶³ He claimed the northwestern states carved out of that territory could have introduced slavery if they had

⁶² *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 764, 737. Southerners drew upon Madison’s remarks in 1787 and in the Federalist papers to argue that even the “Father of the Constitution” had deemed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 unconstitutional. Bonner, *Mastering America*, 69–70; R. Alton Lee, “Slavery and the Oregon Territorial Issue: Prelude to the Compromise of 1850,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 64 (July 1973): 115.

⁶³ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1021, 747.

wished; they simply chose not to do so. He attributed the preservation of that free soil to the “good sense of the inhabitants of these States,” who chose “to exclude the evil from their borders” and thereby secured them for a future of “unexampled prosperity and progress.” Since all “Territories stood in the same relation to the General Government as did the States...the power to legislate for the government and general policy of Territories” did not belong in Congress but “necessarily remained with the people of the Territories.”⁶⁴

William Preston of Virginia concurred with the sympathies of these northwestern congressmen, voicing his approval of striving “to bring every citizen in this nation upon the broad, elevated American platform of popular sovereignty, resting with the people and with no Government whatsoever.” Preston also supported that doctrine because he believed it would most fairly resolve the slavery issue for the nation. How else “can this question be relieved from perpetual agitation, but by the enactment of a law assenting to the surrender of this territorial power to those to whom it belongs, and taking it from us, to whom it does not belong?” Preston then forecast the rise of “a great conservative party in the country, to be found north and south, in every portion of the Union,” built upon that single principle that the people of a Territory must decide their own laws. “I do not mean the Whig or the Democratic party,” he explained, “it may be and will be constituted of both. But upon it will be found that great republican national party who can and will maintain the Constitution and the Union.” By uniting around that party and its doctrine of popular sovereignty, Preston alleged, northern and southern extremism would dissipate and the Union would be saved.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 645; *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 747.

⁶⁵ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd Sess., 478-80.

Most northern Democrats who embraced popular sovereignty were driven by the conviction that in northern territories lying above the 36 degrees 30' line, settlers would undoubtedly prohibit slavery themselves, by popular vote. This method would thus achieve the same end sought by antislavery and abolitionist Americans, while at the same time preserving the most sacred democratic rights of the people and settling sectional turmoil instigated by the Wilmot Proviso. New York Democrat Ausburn Birdsall pointed to Iowa as the exemplar territory that epitomized popular sovereignty's effectiveness. As part of the land acquired from the Louisiana Purchase, Iowa Territory was ruled by no ordinance barring the institution of slavery from its borders. "[Y]et, by natural laws," Birdsall noted, "it was a free Territory, and is a free State" because migrants to those lands utilized their power to make their own decisions. Missourian Willard P. Hall concurred, arguing that "since we know that slavery cannot exist in Oregon...the attempt to embarrass the Oregon question with the clause restricting that institution, appears to me a most needless, a most reckless, a most wicked supererogation."⁶⁶

These popular sovereignty advocates believed that supporters of the Wilmot Proviso—not so-called doughfaces—had adopted a political position aimed at making political gains rather than at the safety and perpetuity of the Union. "Men worked themselves into a fever about this Wilmot proviso," Brodhead asserted, regarding territories like California and New Mexico that simply were not conducive to slaveholding. "Southern men would probably not take their slaves there in any numbers...but southern men, by a very natural feeling, were unwilling to be put under the ban." Astonished by the extremes to which North and South had both flown following the Wilmot Proviso's introduction, he wondered that "southern gentlemen assume just the

⁶⁶ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 795, 803.

position the abolitionists of the North, and their allies, desire them to take,” arguing that Congress had the power to introduce slavery into new territories, and that they should utilize that power. “They want a pretext to agitate the slavery question in Congress” for its expansion, he explained, just as northerners sought to agitate it in favor of abolition. Brodhead believed popular sovereignty the only real solution to this dilemma. The Democratic Party’s presidential nominee and popular sovereignty hero Lewis Cass of Michigan “repudiated these extreme positions on both sides.”⁶⁷

In 1848, with Cass on the Democratic ticket, popular sovereignty was just gaining momentum on a national platform, but the underlying principles of that doctrine had been popular in the Northwest for years. Since the early settlement of Illinois and her sister states of the Northwest Territory, migrants had wrestled with the Northwest Ordinance and its restrictions upon their rights. Many northwestern popular sovereignty advocates believed the Ordinance had not the power—whether legal or actual—to keep slavery from entering the Northwest; only the inhabitants ultimately decided that question.⁶⁸ Although Lincoln had settled in the state six years after the virulent debate over holding a statewide convention had unsettled the new state of Illinois, he nevertheless knew of those events and had politically matured in their wake. His politics had always been somewhat determined by his antislavery convictions, but time and experience began to solidify a concurrent belief that slavery would poison any ground that had not been specifically set aside as free soil. By the time he debated Stephen Douglas for an Illinois

⁶⁷ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 813; *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 649.

⁶⁸ Lewis Cass believed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had gone beyond the tradition of local self-government fought for in the American Revolution and upheld by the Founding Fathers, and that it unconstitutionally gave Congress a power it did not legally have. Stephen Douglas was reluctant to go so far in his popular sovereignty position, yet emphasized that Congress “*should* be guided by ‘the great principle’ of local self-government.” Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery* (New York and other cities: Oxford University Press, 2001), 268.

Senate seat, his arguments in favor of the Northwest Ordinance had become cemented by regular use. This process began, for Lincoln, during his congressional term, when he perceived that the South had not gradually loosened its commitment to slavery but had bound itself closer to the institution; that slavery strangled the southern nonslaveholder as well as the free black, eliminating his opportunities to the point of poverty or the decision to migrate hundreds of miles away; and that the country would have to choose between the eradication of slavery embodied by the Wilmot Proviso, and the cementation of slavery through popular sovereignty.

Popular sovereignty, he believed, posed a far greater danger to the Union than proslavery ideology because it hid its potentially proslavery implications behind a veneer of national unity and moderation.⁶⁹ It legitimized an otherwise radical ideology of proslavery, created by a small section of slaveholders seeking greater wealth and control over the nonslaveholding population.⁷⁰ Thus, when David Wilmot responded to these popular sovereignty expostulations with the rhetorical question, “if the proviso was not adopted and acted on, would not slaveholders go into these territories, and would not the perpetuation of slavery there inevitably follow,” Lincoln answered “yes.”⁷¹ He also

⁶⁹ Lincoln’s derision for popular sovereignty emerged in many of his speeches. *CW*, II: 240, 278; III: 405, 437, 465–67.

⁷⁰ Lincoln appears to have been as fearful of the political and practical attractiveness of popular sovereignty—its ability to sway masses of white nonslaveholders who opposed slavery but nonetheless thought popular sovereignty the fairest method of resolving the slavery issue—as of the attractiveness of its principles. Therefore, although I agree with Fehrenbacher and others who argue that Lincoln “discovered in popular sovereignty an odious new principle which placed slavery and freedom on the same ethical level,” for the purposes of this study I rather emphasize his fear that popular sovereignty appeared as a fair, moderate solution to a divisive issue. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 24; Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom and Expansion*, 150.

⁷¹ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 813. Lincoln voted in favor of the anti-slavery extension principle several other times in Congress. In 1855, Lincoln informed his Kentuckian friend Joshua Speed that “[w]hen I was at Washington I voted for the Wilmot Proviso as good as forty times.” *CW*, II: 323. When the Senate’s amendment to the Oregon bill proposed to strike out all reference to the ordinance of 1787, Lincoln voted against that amendment. He also voted against an amendment to base the exclusion of slavery in Oregon

campaigned vigorously for Zachary Taylor against Cass. On July 27, 1848, his speech on “The Presidential Question” carefully dodged the ambiguity of Taylor’s own views on the proviso, while it castigated the position held by Cass. “I am a northern man, or, rather, a western free State man,” Lincoln asserted, “with a constituency I believe to be, and with personal feelings I know to be, against the extension of slavery.” Therefore, he sought to reveal to his constituents and to the nation the real choice that lay before them. While Taylor might not push to apply the Wilmot Proviso, Lincoln explained, he would not veto it should Congress pass the restriction. Cass, meanwhile, would inevitably bring slavery into new territories through the back door of popular sovereignty. Therefore, regardless of Taylor’s ideological commitment to the Wilmot Proviso, Cass must be defeated.⁷²

As a lawyer, Lincoln was also familiar with such cases as those invoked by John Pettit of Indiana, who with “a legal mind” proved to the House that the Northwest Ordinance had actively worked to halt slavery’s growth in the Northwest. He mentioned that several Kentucky court cases “had, over and over again, decided that a negro born in the Northwest Territory after the passage of the ordinance in 1787 could not be taken into slavery at all.” If members of the House “did not like the decisions of the courts of Kentucky—as some were pleased to call it a *quasi* slaveholding State—let them go further south, and he would refer them to adjudicated cases in Missouri and Louisiana, where the courts held precisely the same doctrine, and affirmed the ordinance to be

not the Missouri Compromise line, instead of the Northwest Ordinance. *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1027 and 1062.

⁷² *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1041. The party line adopted by Whigs was that Cass, as president, would utilize executive power to veto the Wilmot Proviso, while Taylor would refuse to do so. Morrison, *Democratic Politics*, 156. Lincoln reiterated time and again, in his campaign speeches for Taylor in New England and Illinois, that he believed General Taylor “would not veto the Wilmot proviso if passed by Congress.” *CW*, II: 12.

binding.” In numerous ways, Lincoln learned, the Northwest Ordinance’s antislavery clause had kept the institution at bay.⁷³

If these discussions, alone, had enveloped the 30th Congress, Lincoln would have gathered that slavery was, as Joshua Giddings claimed, the “transcendent and absorbing question which occupies the intellect of the nation.” As the records of the *Congressional Globe* make apparent, slavery did devour much of the 30th Congress’s time and attention, and the ensuing debates often appear to ominously portend the dissolution of the Union. Giddings perceived the formation of new parties as “old party lines are becoming indistinct and uncertain. A portion of those who have heretofore acted with us now incline to the cause of extending slavery, and some who have acted against us now go for limiting that institution.” Persisting in this portrait of a 30th Congress shattered by the slavery issue, Giddings declared that “on this principle of opposing all attempts of the Federal Government to extend and uphold that institution [slavery], against all interference or connection with slavery....is now based a party, *or the germ of a party, that will at no distant day become dominant in this nation.*”⁷⁴ Elihu Root feared that such portentous claims might prove true. Early in the session, in December 1847, he stated, “[i]t requires no gift of prophecy to foretell that there is even now a *black* cloud lowering upon our political horizon—I hope I am understood, sir; I say a *black* cloud—which is soon to burst, with more wind and thunder than anything else...with wind and thunder sufficient to distract this body and disturb the peace of the country.”⁷⁵

Throughout the two sessions of the 30th the introduction of so many petitions, bills, and debates on topics other than slavery, especially those directed related to trade,

⁷³ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 718.

⁷⁴ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 394; *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 380.

⁷⁵ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 30.

railroad expansion, the budget, and the postal system, belied the charge that slavery had yet become an all-consuming issue drowning out all others. Most importantly, many southerners permitted their love for the Union and desire for compromise to shine through even the most sectional of rants. These statements convinced Lincoln, first, that southern leaders might talk of secession all they liked but they would never actually carry it through; and second, that the masses of southern nonslaveholders would never rally behind secession in defense of slavery.

Amid warnings that the South would not tolerate the North's antislavery politics, the more conciliatory and Unionist remarks of several southern congressmen served to temper the proceedings and remind the representatives that secession remained a radical doctrine attracting relatively few supporters within the South. Avid Whig leader Alexander Stephens gave a speech implicitly denouncing Democrats as "political managers and intriguers, who had not the principle and spirit of men about them." Stephens claimed "he would prefer an out-and-out Wilmot proviso man to one who would undertake to cheat him, to deceive him," and to mislead his constituents. That Stephens's Wilmot Proviso comment did not incite the wrath of the entire southern delegation indicates that, in 1848, sectionalism had not yet come to define American politics. Lincoln would have agreed with Stephens's further remarks that the Democratic Party's position of popular sovereignty sought merely to "deceive, mislead, humbug the honest yeomanry of this country."⁷⁶ Joseph Woodward of South Carolina, though he fervently fought against the Wilmot Proviso, urged the North to embrace compromise with the South at a level bargaining table, just as they had done in 1787. Meanwhile, North Carolina representative Thomas Clingman's remarks reminded the House that the

⁷⁶ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 588.

South remained committed to Union with the North. “I voted against the rule excluding abolition petitions,” Clingman explained, “not only because I regarded that rule as an infringement of the right of petition, but because I was well aware that most of the citizens of the northern States viewed it in that light.” Forcing the North to accept that rule, Clingman explicated, had only allowed abolitionists to “acquire a great show of strength by blending with themselves the friends of the right of petition.”⁷⁷

Even Thomas Bayly, the outspoken proslavery representative from Virginia, left the door open to better relations between North and South. Decrying abolitionists for hypocritically condemning southerners for slavery even as their own northern states sought to exclude or limit the freedoms of blacks within their borders, he castigated Giddings and other radicals on the House floor. Yet, when Illinois representative Orland Ficklin openly admitted the restrictions placed upon blacks by the Illinois legislature, Bayly responded with appreciation for his willingness to honestly describe the position assumed by many northerners. Bayly “believed all of the delegation from Illinois—perhaps he did wrong in saying all, but he knew it was true in reference to most of them—were acting towards the South on this subject in a spirit very different from the spirit in which Ohio and other States were acting.” Bayly’s reaction indicates the respect southerners still felt for those northern colleagues who did not seek to place the blame for slavery upon their shoulders, or to interfere with the institution as it existed in the South.⁷⁸

The subject of Bayly’s tirade—the prevalence of anti-black sentiment among whites both North and South—also resonated with Lincoln. Familiar with the often

⁷⁷ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 850, 41.

⁷⁸ *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 612.

violent anti-black feelings exhibited by so many of his constituents in Illinois, Lincoln knew that white northerners and southerners shared a common antipathy toward African Americans—an antipathy that reminded him of the further commonalities between his Illinoisans and the typical white southerner. Clingman had mentioned those “similar feelings,” explicitly referencing “the extraordinary provision in the new constitution of Illinois, to prevent free negroes from being admitted into the territory of that State.” These brief glimpses into the ideology of the white southern nonslaveholder reminded Lincoln that, as Palfrey alleged, the political divide in regard to the slavery question was not between the North and the South, but rather “was between fifteen millions of white non-slaveholding people and some three hundred thousand white slaveholding people of this Union—between fourteen thousand of thousands on the one side, and three hundred thousand on the other.” The class divide between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, Lincoln believed, served as a greater obstacle to political coalescence than the geographical divide between North and South. This gulf between slaveholders and nonslaveholders would steer nonslaveholders away from any radical secessionist movement based on the extension of slavery—an institution that did not serve their best interests.⁷⁹

Because he believed men tended to act in their own self-interest, and that living in a slave-based society offered little benefit to the nonslaveholder, Lincoln did not perceive secession as a real threat in 1849 and, more importantly, he did not believe it would ever pose as serious a threat to the Union as it ultimately did in 1860 and 1861. Furthermore, though the Wilmot Proviso had cleaved the two national parties and forced a sectional vote, with northern congressmen voting for, and southern congressmen voting against,

⁷⁹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 44; *Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 245.

the measure, this sectional tear in the seam of national party organizations still appeared manageable.⁸⁰ Rather than heeding the appeals of John C. Calhoun for southerners to unite, men like Robert Toombs and Alexander Stephens, whom Lincoln knew well from their work as part of the Young Indians, re-committed themselves to the Whig Party of Zachary Taylor. Congressional voting records from Lincoln's session and a few years thereafter support this surprising degree of party unity over the great majority of issues and votes. As Eric Foner has asserted, Lincoln did not believe slavery would inevitably destroy the Union when he finished up his term in Congress and returned home. Rather, he "still viewed the slavery controversy as, in his own words, a 'distracting question,' a threat both to the unity of his party and to the survival of the Union and Constitution he revered" which might be avoided.⁸¹

From his time and experiences in Congress Lincoln concluded that popular sovereignty—not secession—had the capacity to both spread slavery and embroil the nation further in sectional turmoil.⁸² In Washington, D.C., he encountered the same arguments for freedom and territorial sovereignty that had convinced unsuspecting migrants to embrace the proslavery designs of demagogic aristocrats in 1824 Illinois, and

⁸⁰ Scholars debate the extent to which the Democratic Party irrevocably split during this period, and how much the advent of Free Soil had to do with the Wilmot Proviso, rather than with intra-party quarrels between Van Burenites and Polk supporters. Morrison, *Democratic Politics*; Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*; Rayback, *Free Soil*, 78–79; Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 23.

⁸¹ Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, I: 479; Joel H. Silbey, "Parties and Politics in Mid-Nineteenth Century America: A Quantitative and Behavioral Examination" in Silbey, ed., *The Rise and Fall of the Political Parties in the United States, 1789–1989* (Brooklyn, Ny: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1991), 16–17; Silbey, *Party Over Section*, 42–43, 140; Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 55. Rachel Sheldon's study of political culture in Washington, D.C. goes even further, arguing that the "day-to-day interactions of congressmen who lived and worked in Washington served as a buffer for sectional prejudices," and thus insulated them from growing sectionalism in the North and South. Sheldon, "Washington Brotherhood," 1, 108–09.

⁸² As far back as 1837, Lincoln felt popular sovereignty to be a misguided doctrine. Yet at that time he chose to ignore Douglas and his political views, rhetorically asking fellow Whig representative William Minshall: "Isn't that the best mode of treating so small a matter?" Not until his session in U.S. Congress did Lincoln confront the possibility that popular sovereignty could capture a significant portion of the electorate. *CW*, I: 107.

which had created a political culture that continued to embrace state sovereignty over slavery or antislavery. The disregard congressmen and Illinois Democrats displayed toward the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 convinced Lincoln that he would have to strongly counteract the growing movement in favor of popular sovereignty. He knew that “Doughfaces” and Douglas Democrats often gained popularity among southern-born migrants in Illinois who sought to escape slavery without blaming, or restricting the freedoms of, southerners who remained in the South.⁸³ Arguments akin to those presented by Congressman Thomas Henley of Indiana, who cast Wilmot Proviso supporters and Whigs as radical abolitionists, resonated with many of these settlers. Henley and other Democrats’ representation of the Democratic Party as the only political body committed to antislavery, yet truly willing to embrace southern slaveholders and all their faults, attracted droves of voters in the Northwest.⁸⁴

As the second session of the 30th Congress closed and Lincoln returned to Illinois, he carried home with him the satisfaction of Zachary Taylor’s success over General Cass for the presidency, but he looked forward to an uncertain future in Illinois politics. His single term in Washington, D.C., however, had been the most formative of his life. Lincoln had been reintroduced to the power of the Northwest Ordinance, that document that had shaped his state’s history and given him, he believed, the means by which he rose to his present position as U.S. Congressman. Significantly, his time in Congress also coincided with a renewed interest in his family’s history, sparked by a distant relative in Massachusetts.

⁸³ Yonatan Eyal remarks on the Old Northwest’s position “as a key repository of the Young American ethos that influenced the conduct of the Democracy after 1844,” and developed a platform based upon the principle of local self-government. Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828–1861* (New York and other cities: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 124–25.

⁸⁴ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 248.

Solomon Lincoln of Massachusetts, curious if this new Illinois congressman bore any relation to his own family, sent an inquiry to Lincoln asking about his heritage. Lincoln responded to him on March 6, 1848: “I was born Feb. 12th, 1809 in Hardin county, Kentucky. My father’s name is *Thomas*; my grandfather’s was *Abraham*,—the same of [*sic*] my own. My grandfather went from Rockingham county in Virginia, to Kentucky, about the year 1782; and, two years afterwards, was killed by the Indians. We have a vague tradition, that my great-grand father went from Pennsylvania to Virginia; and that he was a quaker. Further back than this, I have never heard any thing.” He apologetically explained that, “Owing to my father being left an orphan at the age of six years, in poverty, and in a new country, he became a wholly uneducated man; which I suppose is the reason why I know so little of our family history.”⁸⁵

Apparently, Lincoln did not consider this inquiry into his heritage much of an inconvenience. He politely responded to Solomon, “[i]f you shall be able to trace any connection between yourself and me, or, in fact, whether you shall or not, I should be pleased to have a line from you at any time.” More importantly, Lincoln did not put his own, awakened, curiosity about his family history at rest with this simple reply. Instead, he acquired the name and address of David Lincoln of Virginia from fellow congressman James McDowell, a Democrat, and wrote to the Virginia Lincoln on March 24, 1848, “to ascertain whether we are not of the same family. I shall be much obliged, if you will write me, telling me, whether you, in any way, know any thing of my grandfather, what relation you are to him, and so on. Also, if you know, where your family came from,

⁸⁵ Lincoln had lived in southwestern Indiana from ages 7 to 21. *CW*, I: 367–79, 455–56.

when they settled in Virginia, tracing them back as far as your knowledge extends.”⁸⁶

After receiving reply from David Lincoln, congressman Abraham Lincoln concluded that David’s uncle was Abraham’s grandfather. Upon realizing he had established this connection with an estranged family member, Lincoln gave a short biography of himself, as well as a short history of his father’s move to the West. After asking David several questions about the family history beyond what he already knew, Lincoln asked if knew “any thing of your family (or rather I may now say, *our* family) farther back than your grandfather?”⁸⁷

These written exchanges Lincoln held with extended family members sparked his interest in his family genealogy and history, causing him to reconsider his father’s and grandfather’s migrations westward. In light of David and Solomon Lincolns’ continued residences in the East, he must have wondered how different his own life would have been if his own grandfather had chosen to remain on the East coast. Most significantly, Abraham Lincoln’s reference to Thomas Lincoln’s poverty not only reveals his own lack of knowledge about his own family but also, significantly, took place within the context of a 30th Congress dominated by the single document that had opened the Northwest to Lincoln’s father. Lincoln began this correspondence with family members separated from him by this migration just as he witnessed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 re-emerge as a crucial political issue in the halls of the national legislature. The confluence of these events sparked the creation of a memory for Lincoln—a memory of his parents’ migration from Kentucky to the Northwest as one made “partly on account of slavery.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *CW*, I, 455–56, 459. Lincoln also wrote again to Solomon on March 24, 1848, intimating to him that he had contacted this other Lincoln to try and acquire additional information. *Ibid.*, I: 459–60.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, I: 462.

⁸⁸ *CW*, IV: 61.

This short period of Lincoln's life would thus shape his evolving memory of his early childhood, and his own connection to the Northwest Ordinance, for years to come. He travelled back to Illinois with the convictions that the Northwest Ordinance had been crucial to preserving its states' freedom from slavery, that the Wilmot Proviso simply applied that principle to all future lands to the benefit of all nonslaveholders, and that the South had become less democratic over time, as an autocratic body of slaveholders increased its power over white nonslaveholders and blacks alike. These ideas coalesced into a general complacency in regard to secessionist threats, since he believed the majority of the South—black and white—would never gather behind a secessionist movement. It also caused Lincoln to fixate on popular sovereignty as the most dangerous doctrine to the Union. Since there was little actual danger of the masses of nonslaveholders allying with their fellow southern slaveholders, the real danger, he believed, existed in a doctrine that undermined anti-slavery arguments. The former congressman thus disregarded the warning of slaveholding congressmen like Venable, that they “shall cease to regard the Union as desirable” if slavery agitation continued.⁸⁹ His mind, and future, was set on defeating popular sovereignty.

⁸⁹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 540.

Chapter Five

Adopting Antislavery Politics, 1849–1854

During his two years in U.S. Congress, Abraham Lincoln gained exposure to a set of ideas that influenced his views of the South and the spread of slavery. Although his political ascent leveled off when he returned to his law career full time in 1849, Lincoln never abandoned politics, and the years between 1849 and 1854 were a politically crucial period of his life. It was then that he began to formulate an antislavery politics, laying the foundation for the position that he would later come to embrace as a Republican leader of the Northwest, as the main challenger to Stephen Douglas, and as the first Republican president of the United States. The post–Wilmot Proviso arguments Lincoln had encountered in Congress, especially those regarding the Northwest Ordinance and migration to the free states, played a vital role in this evolution. By 1854 he had become convinced that the Northwest offered a shining example of America's free soil future in contrast to the South, which was blighted by the effects of slavery; that the Founding Fathers had intended for slavery to eventually disappear from America; and that proslavery sentiment was growing in the South. These three convictions re-activated his political ambitions, inspired his active political involvement against the spread of slavery, and eventually led him to join the Republican Party, through which he challenged Stephen Douglas for a U.S. Senate seat and for the office of President of the United States.

Evidence that the influences of migration and his congressional colleagues had caused Lincoln to reconsider his public stance on slavery first emerged in his 1852 eulogy of Henry Clay. His articulation of a new antislavery politics truly blossomed two

years later, in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, when Stephen Douglas's proposed act threatened the extension of free soil. Although Lincoln's personal antislavery beliefs did not change from 1848 to 1860, he made a monumental shift during the years 1849 to 1854, from downplaying the slavery issue to publicly advocating for the non-extension of slavery into U.S. territories. In his public statements following the Kansas-Nebraska Act's passage, Lincoln emphasized the Northwest Ordinance, Jefferson's role in restricting slavery in U.S. territories, and the evils of slavery—all of which, he had learned from both antislavery congressional colleagues and anti-slave system migrants, were crucial to ensuring America's future as a nation freed from slavery. Meanwhile, the little he gleaned from the South gave him the discomfiting realization that proslavery doctrine had grown, rather than withered, in the region. Nevertheless, he believed proslavery secessionism would never enrapture the majority of white southern nonslaveholders. His political upbringing in Illinois, as well as the statistics and statements of his congressional colleagues, had taught him that southerners often sought to flee from the system, even if that entailed leaving behind friends, family, and home. Popular sovereignty, far more than proslavery radicalism, proved uniquely capable of attracting the masses, both North and South. Lincoln feared that the nation would slide into this comfortable doctrine of self-determination, and thereby let slavery in through the back door. A nation opposed to slavery, he feared, might allow it to spread in the name of Union, compromise, or conciliation. That it could possibly come in through the front door, with the support of the vast majority of white southerners, did not seem plausible. Therefore, from 1849 to 1854 Lincoln drew upon his northwestern

experience and his time in Congress to emerge as a leading Illinois opponent of popular sovereignty and the extension of slavery in the United States.

Lincoln returned to Illinois in 1849 after helping to elect Zachary Taylor the next Whig president. Through his work with the Young Indians, his familiarity with southern members of Congress, and his continued adherence to national Whig principles, Lincoln ended his single term convinced that a strict party adherence to the Union would alleviate sectional tensions over slavery and allow the question to eventually be resolved.

Similarly convinced that both abolitionism and proslavery radicalism brought only disunion and destruction, Lincoln sought to avoid the two extremes in favor of a national course that continued the Union's commitment to gradually ending slavery without forcing any plan upon the South. Campaigning for Taylor in the Northeast in 1849, he carefully navigated around the question of slavery, supporting his party's tactic of explaining that the slaveholding Taylor was opposed to any veto of the Wilmot Proviso, while avoiding the question of whether or not he personally supported or opposed the extension of slavery in the territories. Lincoln explained in his Massachusetts speeches for Taylor "that the will of the people should produce its own results, without Executive influence." He therefore left the distinction between Taylor and Cass to rest on the very basic point that Cass "has avowed his favor of the unlimited exercise of the veto power," while Taylor would not authoritatively reject the legislation of U.S. Congress.¹ The "Lone Whig Star" of Illinois's speeches belied that nationwide, people perceived him as the leading Whig representative of Illinois. Lincoln saw this achievement as just the

¹ *CW*, II: 2, 14.

beginning for Illinois, and he hoped to expand upon the Whig stronghold in central Illinois.²

During the spring of 1849 Lincoln avidly worked to accomplish this through his support of particular Illinois Whigs as candidates for various offices on the local and national level. Lincoln received requests from a multitude of constituents and political friends, many of whom he wrote recommendation letters for appointments. These positions included everything from the local Tremont postmaster to national commissioner of the General Land Office.³ By April, many of the Illinois Whigs who had worked to elect Taylor feared his administration had neglected them in favor of other Whigs. William D. Briggs of Tremont explained to Lincoln that he personally did not seek an appointment, but he wished to at least “have a good Whig Taylor man appointed.” Yet two Whigs, Dr. Shaw and Dr. Stockwell, neither of whom had supported Taylor for President, were now put forward as leading candidates for a position within the administration. Both these men, Briggs pleaded, “threw cold water on the cause during the canvass....For Heavens sake do not let those who did nothing for Old Zack be the first benefited by his election.” George Rives pointed out to Lincoln that proportionate to Whig strength in their respective states, Missouri and Wisconsin men had received more appointments than Whigs of Illinois. James Kennaday, meanwhile, complained that “[i]f bolters are to be fattened up with offices from the general

² *CW*, II:3, 2:32. As a member of the Young Indians, Lincoln had also done critical work to elect President Zachary Taylor; while as the Lone Whig Star he helped accelerate the party to a greater future in the Northwest. Consequently, he anticipated he would continue to play an important role in creating a brighter future for the Whig Party in Illinois.

³ William D. Briggs to Lincoln, April 19, 1849, Jesse K. Dubois to Lincoln, April 2, 1848, C. Burr Artz to Lincoln, April 19, 1849, LC. In the case of Ann E. Campbell, an extended family member asked Lincoln for his aid in getting her husband an appointment in Washington, D.C. Ann E. Campbell to Lincoln, April 29, 1849, *Ibid*. Charles H. Constable was an old friend who humbly explained to Lincoln his necessity for any appointment that would pay off his debts and support his family. Constable to Lincoln, May 5, 1849, *Ibid*.

Government, it is poor encouragement for whigs who never ask for office, to keep up a regular organization at home.” He informed Lincoln that he had “promised the whigs of this county that the acts of a bolter should be brought before you and the general government....and I have kept my word.” Only a Taylor Whig deserved to receive an appointment from the president’s administration.⁴

One reason Illinoisans perhaps felt slighted stemmed from President Taylor’s decision to institute a new practice in receiving requests and recommendations for appointments within his administration. Taylor had decided to immediately direct all letters and persons requesting appointments to the respective departments of his administration, and he refused to deviate from this practice in the least. Ben E. Green illustrated the difficulties inherent in this system and recalled to Lincoln his unsuccessful attempt to submit any sort of recommendation directly to President Taylor, despite getting an interview with him in late May 1849. Green expressed his frustration that because Lincoln’s letter would not be read by Taylor but by the secretary of the Interior, it was difficult for General Taylor to “know the true feeling of his friends in Illinois.” Lincoln’s task was rendered even more challenging by the apparent inability of his friend and successor to U.S. Congress, Edward D. Baker, to assist in these efforts. Baker told Lincoln he was “annoyed to Death, about offices.” Meanwhile, according to his constituents, Baker apparently did not exert any great efforts to attain offices for them. George Rives said he did not believe there had been “any effort made by our prominent men in behalf of our state” since, as C. Burr Artz alleged, Baker had “neglected” the

⁴ William D. Briggs to Lincoln, April 19, 1849, James Kennady to Lincoln, May 2, 1849, LC.

matters of his constituents. In light of this neglect, Illinoisans continued to viewed Lincoln as the state's "sole representative."⁵

The majority of letters exchanged between Lincoln and his political friends, however, revolved around the prized position of commissioner of the General Land Office, which Illinois Whigs believed should go to a Taylor Whig from Illinois. Lincoln was at first insistent that the office go to one of several Illinoisans who had supported Taylor and expressed interest in the position—Martin P. Sweet, James L. D. Morrison, Orville H. Browning, or Cyrus Edwards—but not to himself. However, Lincoln and his fellow Whigs soon realized that Justin L. Butterfield, a Chicago Whig who had disdained the Whig nomination of Taylor, had been employing his political connections (some of them within the Taylor Cabinet) to win the General Land Office appointment.⁶ Josiah M. Lucas believed "every whig in Illinois—with few exceptions" would support Cyrus Edwards, or Lincoln if he should choose to vie for the position, but Butterfield "would be a mere tool, without any will of his own." Lucas believed no one in Illinois wanted Butterfield to get it and that an immediate effort must be made to prevent Secretary of the Interior Thomas Ewing from convincing Taylor that Butterfield was the best choice.⁷ In the meantime, Lucas rushed to Taylor's office and showed him several letters proving "that Butterfield was the last man in the state that Whigs would go for, for any office." Apparently affected by this evidence against Butterfield, Taylor held off the appointment for several weeks.⁸ Lincoln had still hesitated to put forward his name as a candidate for

⁵ Ben E. Green to Lincoln, May 29, 1849, Edward D. Baker to Lincoln, April 27, 1849, George W. Rives to Lincoln, April 25, 1849, C. Burr Artz to Lincoln, April 19, 1849, LC.

⁶ Josiah M. Lucas to Lincoln, April 12, 1849, LC; *CW*, II:28–29.

⁷ Thomas Ewing exercised the power of his position to aid Justin Butterfield in attaining the appointment, then offered Lincoln the governorship of the Oregon Territory. Donald, *Lincoln*, 139–41.

⁸ Josiah M. Lucas to Lincoln, April 12, 1849, Lucas to Lincoln, May 7, 1849, William H. Henderson to Lincoln, May 13, 1849, LC. Lucas told Anson G. Henry that Taylor had "expressed great partiality for

the office, always believing that he should get it if he chose to apply, but preferring that one of his Taylor Whig friends be chosen instead. However, he refused to allow Justin Butterfield, who had opposed Taylor's candidacy and done nothing to elect him to national office, to receive the appointment. Writing to southern Whig William B. Preston, with whom he had served in U.S. Congress, Lincoln explained that he had "received letters from different persons at Washington assuring me it was not improbable that Justin Butterfield, of Chicago, Ills., would be appointed Commissioner of the Genl. Land-Office. It was to avert this very thing, that I called on you....and besought you that, so far as in your power, no man from Illinois should be appointed to any high office, without my being at least heard on the question." Lincoln intimated that while Butterfield was a personal friend of his, he had proven, multiple times, that he would follow the winds for a good appointment, whether those winds blew for or against the benefit of the Whig party. Last year, "when you and I were almost sweating blood to have Genl. Taylor nominated," Lincoln remembered, "this same man was ridiculing the idea, and going for Mr. Clay." Then, when the nomination went to Taylor, Butterfield did not lend any assistance to the Whig campaign. Lincoln warned Preston that awarding these offices to detractors would ultimately hurt the cause of the Whig Party and, by extension, the nation itself.⁹

As Lincoln began to question his previous assumption that a fellow Taylor Whig from Illinois would undoubtedly receive the General Land Office position, he decided that he should, for the benefit of the Illinois Whig party, muster all available resources to

Lincoln," and derisively referring to Butterfield, noted that Taylor "was astonished to find that Butternuts was not their choice." Josiah M. Lucas to Anson G. Henry, May 22, 1849, LC.

⁹ *CW*, II:48-49.

win the appointment for himself.¹⁰ He therefore drew on local, state, regional, and national ties to gain the commissionership. He sent requests to former congressional colleagues like Elisha Embree of Indiana, “to write General Taylor at once, saying that either *I, or the man I recommend*, should, in your opinion, be appointed to that office, if any one from Illinois shall be.” Several of these men from the 30th Congress replied in Lincoln’s favor. Abraham R. McIlvaine of Pennsylvania agreed to send Taylor a letter, intimating that “there is no one in Ill. or any other state, upon whom I would rather see this appointment fall.” Chester Butler, also a Pennsylvania congressman, and Maryland Whig Alexander Evans, each reiterated the same sentiment.¹¹ Lincoln returned to those men whom he had before talked out of recommending him, like Nathaniel Pope, U.S. district judge for the state of Illinois. Aware of the late hour of his request, Lincoln asked Pope in a June 8, 1849, letter whether he could not, “without embarrassment, or any impropriety, so far vindicate the truth of history, as to briefly state to me, in a letter, what you did say to me last spring on my arrival here from Washington, in relation to my becoming an applicant for that office?” Fearing that Thomas Ewing would do all in his power to suppress consideration for him, he asked supporters to write to other Whigs, such as John J. Crittenden, for support in Washington, D.C. Lincoln hoped resurrecting these statements and wielding them on his behalf would prove enough to convince Taylor to extend him the job.¹² John H. Morrison, Jesse K. Dubois, George W. Stipp, William T. Page, General Asahel Gridley, Anson G. Henry, and a host of other politically active

¹⁰ As Thomas F. Schwartz explains, Lincoln initially declined to run for the General Land Office because he knew there were several qualified Whig applicants, and he upheld “organizational efficiency and unity” as vital to the strength of the Whig Party. Schwartz, “‘An Egregious Political Blunder:’ Justin Butterfield, Lincoln, and Illinois Whiggery,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 8 (January 1986): 13–14.

¹¹ *CW*, II:50; Abraham R. McIlvaine to Lincoln, June 18, 1849, Chester Butler to Lincoln, June 18, 1849, Alexander Evans to Lincoln, June 23, 1849, LC.

¹² Lincoln to Nathaniel Pope, June 8, 1849, LC; *CW*, II:49–50.

Illinois friends sent letters and petitions to Washington, D.C., on Lincoln's behalf. That Lincoln gathered a sense of his own vital importance to the Whig cause was unavoidable; as William H. Henderson assured him: "Illinois looks to you, her hopes are all concentrated upon you."¹³

Lincoln also drew upon his southern Whig connections for support. He and William B. Preston, formerly Whig congressman from Virginia during Lincoln's term, exchanged numerous letters after Preston accepted the post of Secretary of the Navy under President Taylor. Feeling that "[n]o member of the cabinet knows so well...the great anxiety I felt for Gen. Taylor's election," Lincoln pressed Preston early on to make sure Whigs received appointments over Democratic competitors. Upon hearing rumors that Justin Butterfield would likely receive the appointment, he complained again to his southern Whig confidant. "It was to avert this very thing, that I called on you at your rooms one Sunday evening shortly after you were installed, and besought you that, so far as in your power, no man from Illinois should be appointed to any high office, without my being at least heard on the question." Lincoln also seemed to imply that the Whig Party had changed, that a new guard had transitioned it to the new times, and that "making appointments through old-hawker foreign influences" would only turn people away from them.¹⁴ Considering Preston a political friend, he informed him that it would be prudent to grant the position to any Taylor Whig, and above all, to any one but Butterfield. Lincoln similarly penned to John M. Clayton his concerns that Taylor was

¹³ George W. Stipp to Lincoln, June 1, 1849, William T. Page to Lincoln, June 11, 1849, Anson G. Henry to Lincoln, June 11, 1849, E. F. Ryan to Lincoln, June 11, 1849, William H. Henderson to Lincoln, June 11, 1849, LC.

¹⁴ *CW*, II:42–45, 2:48–49.

not managing his appointments as he should, and to Willie P. Mangum, a senator from North Carolina, for a recommendation.¹⁵

When rumors of Butterfield's candidacy for the position persisted, Lincoln finally decided to travel to Washington, D.C., to lobby in person for the General Land Office commissionership, in rejection of Justin Butterfield's proposition that they each remain at home and allow the Taylor administration to make its own decision.¹⁶ In a memorandum Lincoln wrote to Taylor in June 1849, he emphasized the vast extent to which Illinois and her Whig party leadership had been ignored. He largely agreed with friend David Davis, who had remarked on how "strange" it was "that the voice of members of Congress from a State is not taken about appointments." To Lincoln, this neglect perhaps seemed more unnerving than strange. In his letter to Taylor, he emphasized the significance not only of Illinois but particularly of central Illinois—that section of the state that contained many Kentuckians and other southern migrants who revered Henry Clay. While northern and southern Illinois had received attention from the administration, central Illinois had been given no apparent consideration in its appointment decisions. "Is the center nothing?" Lincoln asked. "[T]hat center which alone has ever given you a Whig representative?" This insistent plea underscored Lincoln's frustration in navigating between the politics of northern and southern Illinois, and finding a moderate course. To this one-term congressman, the center of Illinois represented the heart of the national Whig party, and its own attempt to unite the sections of North and South under one platform. By ignoring the middle of his state and pandering to the most extreme sections of it instead, Lincoln

¹⁵ *CW*, II:61, 2:53.

¹⁶ Anson G. Henry to Lincoln [May 24, 1849], Richard M. Young to Lincoln, May 7, 1840, Justin Butterfield to Lincoln, June 9, 1849, LC.

believed the Taylor administration undid its own work and erased the accomplishments of recent months and years.¹⁷

Despite this sincere and coordinated effort on Lincoln's behalf, Justin Butterfield ultimately received the position of commissioner of the General Land Office; Lincoln, offered the station of Governor of the Oregon Territory, rejected it in favor of returning to his law practice in Illinois. For the next several years, law and family matters kept Lincoln quite busy. His father, Thomas Lincoln, died in 1851, not long after Mary's father passed away, and Lincoln dealt with financial matters following in the wake of these deaths.¹⁸ Upon returning to Springfield, Illinois, in 1849, most of his time was consumed by a busy law practice and circuit routine. Some historians depict this period of Lincoln's life as a politically inactive time when he withdrew from politics, possibly intending to permanently lay at rest all his former ambitions in that area.¹⁹ Though his disinclination to seek or accept political positions certainly resulted in a decreased involvement from his former days as congressman, Lincoln did not leave politics behind

¹⁷ David Davis to Lincoln, June 6, 1849, LC; *CW*, II:54.

¹⁸ Thomas Lincoln had been sick almost to the point of death in May 1849, in the midst of Lincoln's appointment struggles. The estranged son had visited his father at his stepbrother John D. Johnston's behest. Augustus H. Chapman to Lincoln, May 24, 1849, John D. Johnston to Lincoln, May 25, 1849, LC; *CW*, II:94–95. Lincoln wrote letters to his stepbrother regarding their mother's financial security. He also took part in settling financial difficulties in the wake of Robert Todd's passing. *CW*, II: 112, 11–12, 194–95.

¹⁹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 60; White, Jr., *A. Lincoln*, 167–85; and Donald, *Lincoln*, 142 portray an abrupt conclusion of Lincoln's political career in 1849, then its restart with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Other scholarship, however, has acknowledged that Lincoln "did not completely abandon politics during the early 1850s." William C. Harris, *Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 58. See also Roy Morris, Jr. *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) 55; Schwartz, "An Egregious Political Blunder," 12–14. Don E. Fehrenbacher believed the characterization that Lincoln "retired" from politics considerably overstates the case," and offers John J. Duff, *A. Lincoln; Prairie Lawyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) and Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln; a Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), as other notable examples of that trend. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 20, 174 n4.

him.²⁰ Besides remaining apprised of national political events through his avid reading of newspapers and speeches, the former congressman continued to participate in local and state Whig events and held party responsibilities, clearly retaining an active presence among the Illinois Whigs.²¹ Following President Taylor's death in 1850 and Henry Clay's passing in 1852, this "lone Whig star" also delivered two eulogies of national Whig leaders. His language in these two eulogies, written just two years apart from one another, each addressed the slavery issue in very different ways. The differences between them belie Lincoln's growing concern both that the slavery issue would destroy the Union and that the idea that slavery was not a moral wrong but a positive good was growing in the South. Hailing the life of Zachary Taylor, a westerner raised in Kentucky after his parents moved from Virginia, Lincoln asserted that the nation had lost a key leader in resolving the slavery issue. "I fear the one *great* question of the Union, is not now so likely to be partially acquiesced in by the different sections of the Union, as it would have been," he assured his audience, "could Gen. Taylor have been spared to us." Though alienated from the Taylor administration after failing to acquire the General Land Office for an Illinoisan, Lincoln nevertheless continued to hold on to his belief that Taylor and his position on the slavery issue had held great potential for resolving differences over slavery.²²

By the time Abraham Lincoln delivered his eulogy of Henry Clay to a small audience in Illinois on July 6, 1852, that fear over the "one *great* question of the Union" had developed into a firm conviction that Lincoln and others opposed to the spread of

²⁰ Lincoln not only denied rumors that he was seeking a seat in the next Congress, but stated that he wouldn't want the job. *CW*, II:79.

²¹ *CW*, II: 113, 162.

²² *CW*, II: 83–84.

slavery must take on a public role to prevent proslavery and popular sovereignty doctrines from gaining momentum. This eulogy thus marks a significant departure from his previous career. Though unafraid to speak his mind in regard to the Mexican-American War or the swath of rioting that engulfed a fevered nation in 1837, Lincoln had never publicly advocated antislavery principles to his constituents. The resolutions he had submitted with fellow Illinois Whig Dan Stone in 1836, which did explicitly outline his sentiments regarding slavery, and his votes in favor of the Wilmot Proviso, were never expressed in his speeches until 1852. Not until then did Lincoln dare to publicly express his opinions on slavery, and where the nation should stand in regard to it, in an intentional effort to convince Illinois and the rest of the nation to commit itself to the non-extension of slavery.

Lincoln's experiences in the 30th Congress, his upbringing and experiences in the Northwest, and the information he continued to receive from and about the South, all gave him the tools he needed to verbalize these antislavery arguments.²³ Lincoln explained his antislavery position to Richard Yates, a fellow southern-born migrant to Illinois with a very similar stance on slavery. Addressing the slavery question as it related to the Wilmot Proviso and the compromise package proposed by Henry Clay, Lincoln declared that he remained "inflexible" in his "opposition to the extention [sic] of slavery into territories now free." He therefore supported the Wilmot Proviso and declared that if ever elected to Congress again, he would continue to support that proviso as long as it presented "the best mode of preventing" slavery's extension "at the same time as not endangering any dearer object." If at any point the proviso itself threatened to hinder the

²³ As Don E. Fehrenbacher notes: "The Illinois environment thus deserves careful attention not only as a backdrop but as one of the basic reasons for Lincoln's emergence" in the 1850s. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 5.

nation's commitment to anti-slavery extension principles, or to endanger the Union, he vowed, he would relinquish his support of it. Lincoln further informed Yates that "I have not at any time supposed the Union to be in so much danger as some others have—I have doubted, and still doubt, whether a majority of the voters, in any Congressional District in the nation are in favor of dissolution *in any event*—slavery restricted, or slavery extended."²⁴ Lincoln persisted in his belief that Unionism triumphed in both sections of the country, and that the vitriolic discourse produced in debates over slavery did not accurately reflect the true intentions of the overwhelming majority of the nation's citizens.

The arguments and information Lincoln received about the South from 1850 to 1852 significantly corroborated what he had learned in the Northwest and in Washington, D.C. As particular pamphlets and letters found in his collected papers indicate, Lincoln kept apprised of national discussions revolving around slavery during these years, especially as Congress wrestled to pass a compromise in 1850. One particular speech Lincoln likely read concerning the compromise resolutions was given by Truman Smith, a congressman from Connecticut who had served with him in the 30th Congress. Smith claimed that he had never before spoken on the slavery issue in Congress but now perceived a need to make his own observations known. He first agreed with the same sentiment expressed by Lincoln, that "[t]he dangers arising from this cause have, in my judgment, been greatly exaggerated....I have myself felt very little alarm on this subject. There is in the country a strong and all-pervading attachment to the Union, which cannot

²⁴ Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Lincoln's Theory of Representation: A Significant New Lincoln Document," *Lincoln Lore* 1683 (May 1978): 162.

be weakened, much less destroyed.”²⁵ Next, Smith offered an interpretation of the natural interests dividing slaveholder from non-slaveholder that surely resonated with Lincoln as a northwesterner familiar with nonslaveholders’ migration to Illinois. Smith argued that animosity existed “between different classes of citizens, and not between States or sections—between slaveholders and non-slaveholders both of the free and slave States.” Specifically pointing to westward migration as it played out in the Northwest, he explained that “non-slaveholders of the slave States can and do go to our new possessions....and, what is remarkable, they are, when settled in the country, just as determined to exclude slavery as any other class.” To further advocate the expansion of free territory over slave, Smith provided a chart proving that free states had overwhelmingly gained more population than slave states over time. The chart specifically depicted the gains and losses of northern and southern states in the House of Representatives, projecting that in a few decades, this population increase in the free states would result in a great majority of free state representatives in the House. Finally, Smith referred to the slave trade that continued daily in the District of Columbia. Pointing to southerners’ extreme distaste for slave-trading and the slave trader, he asked: “[w]hy should Southern men endure here what they will not tolerate in their own States? The people of the District are utterly opposed to [the slave trade], and earnestly desire its abrogation.”²⁶

Smith’s insistence that the United States could and should maintain its pledge to eventually eliminate the institution of slavery mirrored Lincoln’s own. Meanwhile, the

²⁵ This pamphlet appears in Lincoln’s papers, and was likely one of the speeches he read regarding the Compromise of 1850. Truman Smith, *Printed Pamphlet on Compromise of 1850*, July 8, 1850, 3, LC.

²⁶ Smith alleged that nearly 500 families had recently settled in northern Virginia from free states, and argued that should this migration trend continue, by 1900 Virginia and other slave states would become free states. Smith, *Printed Pamphlet on Compromise of 1850*, 6, 12-13, 16, LC.

migration-related evidence in support of his case reflected the arguments many colleagues had made from 1847 to 1849. The statements emanating from the *Louisville Kentucky Examiner* in March 1850 may have pushed Lincoln to reconsider his political silence in light of these arguments. The *Examiner* outlined a brief history of the emigration of two southern groups away from the South. The first, the Society of Friends and similar antislavery groups, had once inhabited the slaveholding states but moved on to the free Northwest and continued to do so through the present day. As a result of this trend, “Tennessee has scarcely a meeting of Friends within her borders, and the very large settlements of the members in Virginia and North Carolina have been greatly reduced.” In addition to these “strictly conscientious” folk, “the poor and enterprising” nonslaveholders of the South also moved to free territory. Such statements always alluded to the effects such movements produced upon both sections of the country, but the *Examiner* explicitly pointed to two negative effects of this migration upon the South. First, the exodus of “enterprising classes” has reduced the “common wealth” of their native states; and, second, “the slave States have deteriorated in respect to one of the most sacred of all rights, the right of free speech.” Since so many of those opposed to slavery relocated, proslavery citizens were left to “say what they please, while they who are opposed to slavery are cowed into silence.” Although to the *Examiner* emigration had affected all the slave states, the newspaper separated Kentucky from states like South Carolina when it came to this “despotism” and proclaimed that “but few men in Kentucky would shackle the tongue or the press.” The article also denounced all men who personally hated slavery but rebuked antislavery advocates for publicly speaking against the institution. That hypocritical stance, the *Examiner* argued, had allowed proslavery

enthusiasts the opportunity to press their demands upon the free state and to place limitations on free speech in the South. Such arguments presented by antislavery Americans may have played a role in Lincoln's decision to take a firm public stance against slavery beginning in 1852.²⁷

Meanwhile, political events closer to home continued to reflect the information Lincoln gathered from these sources, and from his colleagues of the 30th Congress. The Illinois Democratic Congressional Convention held in Joliet, Illinois, in September 1850, provided a set of "Resolutions Against Slavery" that evidently left a strong impression upon Lincoln. These resolutions, which Lincoln invoked against Douglas in their third debate at Jonesboro, Illinois, professed an "uncompromising" opposition to the extension of slavery, based upon the principles "recognized by the Ordinance of 1787, which received the sanction of THOMAS JEFFERSON, who is acknowledged by all to be the great oracle and expounder of our faith." That many members of the Democratic Party held such a position, and maintained it through the 1850s despite the party's emphasis on popular sovereignty or the protection of slavery, led Lincoln to deem popular sovereignty as a doctrine of political convenience rather than fervent conviction.²⁸

The combination of all these sources provided Lincoln with a distinct sense that although most Americans opposed slavery for one reason or another, a small proslavery movement threatened the entire Union's security and freedoms. He first articulated a

²⁷ The *Examiner* printed another article, referring to a speech by Alabama senator Jeremiah Clemens in which the southerner declared "the men and women employed in the New England factories as being in a state of deeper degradation than the slaves of the South." An exchange ensued between Clemens and the citizens of Dover, New Hampshire, who rebutted the southerners' charges. Whether or not Lincoln read this article, it corroborated similar statements he had heard and would continue to hear from southerners. *Louisville Kentucky Examiner*, March 1850, LC.

²⁸ During that debate, Lincoln fiendishly called upon the signers of that resolution, all professed Democrats in 1858, to come forward and explain themselves. *CW*, III: 124; "Printed Resolutions Against Slavery," September 11, 1850, LC.

public response to these development in his 1852 eulogy of Henry Clay, in which he argued before his fellow Springfielders that Henry Clay had been committed both to the Union and to the ultimate extinction of slavery. In this eulogy, Lincoln drew upon a newspaper that eulogized Clay though it had opposed him throughout his life, repeating that “Henry Clay belongs to his country—to the world, mere party cannot claim men like him. His career has been national.” Giving his own summation of Clay’s political life, Lincoln explained that the Kentuckian’s attachment to a single political party never clouded his commitment to the Union. When in times of peace a country “naturally divide[s] into parties....the man who is of neither party, is not—cannot be, of any consequence. Mr. Clay, therefore, was of a party.” While many Americans disagreed with Clay on matters of party, Lincoln intoned, there were certain instances that arose in which “there is little or no disagreement amongst intelligent and patriotic Americans.” These Lincoln listed as: the War of 1812, the Missouri Compromise, nullification, and the Compromise of 1850. After Clay’s repeated successes navigating the country through turbulent seas riven by sectionalism and slavery, “he seems constantly to have been regarded by all, as *the* man for a crisis.”²⁹

If Lincoln had simply characterized Clay as an agent of compromise to save the Union from discord, he would have mirrored the sentiments presented in various eulogies by other political figures across the country.³⁰ Yet his own exposure to proslavery and antislavery debates in Congress, combined with his experiences in Illinois politics and society, generated within him an urge to remind his fellow Americans never to forget the

²⁹ *CW* II:122, 126–27, 129.

³⁰ Mark E. Neely, Jr. refers to the “non partisan-nationalism” of all the eulogies given of Henry Clay, excepting Lincoln’s. Neely, “American Nationalism in the Image of Henry Clay: Abraham Lincoln’s Eulogy on Henry Clay in Context,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 106 (Summer/Autumn 2008): 31–60.

most significant aspect of Clay's national career—his “deep devotion to the cause of human liberty.” This devotion extended to various peoples around the globe but applied particularly to those enslaved blacks residing within the United States. Lincoln emphatically asserted that Clay's commitment to ending slavery in America had never altered its course, had never changed, and had never presented a threat to the nation. A slaveholder himself, Clay “did not perceive, as I think no wise man has perceived, how it could be at once eradicated, without producing a greater evil,” Lincoln explicated, and he therefore “oppose[d] both extremes of opinion on the subject.”

Espousing the northwestern approach to the slavery issue that resonated among central Illinoisans, Lincoln condemned abolitionists “who would shiver into fragments the Union of these States...rather than slavery should continue a single hour.” Yet, while they “have received, and receiving their just execration,” so too, would he wield Clay's “name, opinions, and influence against the opposite extreme—against a few, but an increasing number of men, who, for the sake of perpetuating slavery, are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white-man's charter of freedom—the declaration that ‘all men are created free and equal.’” Lincoln then presented a short history of the proslavery movement, noting that John C. Calhoun had sparked it, and South Carolina fostered it. “[N]ot much shocked by political eccentricities and heresies in South Carolina,” Lincoln was nonetheless disturbed when “only last year, I saw with astonishment, what purported to be a letter of a very distinguished and influential clergyman of Virginia, copied, with apparent approbation, into a St. Louis newspaper,” that condemned the principle that “All men are born free and equal.”³¹

³¹ *CW*, II: 126,130.

Within this long address, Lincoln offered his own history of slavery in the United States, arguing that the nation had remained committed to a tradition of the non-extension of slavery since its earliest days. The brief historical record that he traced in the 1852 eulogy sketched a foundation upon which he would erect a more mature antislavery history of the United States, emphasizing the role of Thomas Jefferson and the Northwest Ordinance in creating a free soil American future. For the rest of the decade, Lincoln would draw upon this history not simply to present what he deemed the true account of the nation's antislavery trajectory but also to appeal to "the better angels of our nature"—to the underlying sense that slavery was indeed a moral wrong, a sentiment that he believed resided within most, if not all, Americans. Keeping his eulogy centered on its main subject, Lincoln did not yet pronounce the more assertive statements he would later make regarding the Northwest Ordinance and Jefferson's role in guarding the West against slavery. Although he did point to Jefferson's role in introducing the Northwest Ordinance's clause granting the Northwest Territory its freedom from the peculiar institution, he did not emphasize their significance as he would in later speeches. Instead, he simply quoted Jefferson and Clay to show that each had been firm believers in the immorality of slavery and had promoted the Declaration of Independence's promise of liberty for black as well as white men.³²

Lincoln's Clay eulogy marked a crucial transition in his political career, when he began to publicly articulate the vision of an antislavery Union. Through Clay's words, Lincoln argued that proslavery doctrine "sound[ed] strangely in republican America" and countered the antislavery tradition created by the Founding Fathers and carried forward by Henry Clay. He reiterated this sentiment in subsequent speeches, such as his August

³² *CW*, IV: 271; II: 127–28, 131.

1852 speech to the Springfield Scott Club. Not until the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, however, did Lincoln develop a mature form of these arguments and put forward an antislavery platform upon which, he believed, the country must move forward. Before then, he perceived the growth of proslavery radicalism and popular sovereignty as disturbing but not significant enough to lose faith in the Whig Party. Though he had voted for the Wilmot Proviso, Lincoln had never condemned slavery publicly in U.S. Congress, and, following the lead of those northwesterners who equally abhorred proslavery radicalism and abolitionism alike, he had rarely ever brought up the issue in his other speeches.³³

The Kansas-Nebraska Act compelled him to act when he realized the measure threatened to transform America's position on slavery from antislavery to ambivalence. When Stephen Douglas's proposed act sent ripples of dissent across the nation, the information and reactions Lincoln gathered from his fellow Illinoisans—whether in favor of, or against the Act—prompted him to speak publicly on the issue. Their statements alternatively affirmed his fears that popular sovereignty would capture the minds (and votes) of many and renewed his hopes that he could project America's antislavery past into a vision for the future that would resonate with much of the country. Lincoln recognized that the anti-slave system sentiments of white southern-born northwesterners (as well as many northern-born migrants) often led them to embrace measures such as popular sovereignty, which allowed them to individually oppose slavery without imposing that belief on southerners. Others, meanwhile, so vehemently opposed slavery that they revolted against the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Lincoln hoped that a moderate

³³ *CW*, II:131, 137.

antislavery stance could convince men of both sides to oppose not only proslavery doctrine but popular sovereignty as well.

The Illinois state legislature, immediately following the proposal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the U.S Congress, exhibited the difference of opinion that split Illinoisans over the slavery issue. Attempting to pass legislation regarding the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the legislature batted various proposals back and forth. Democrat Edward Omelveny staunchly supported Douglas and the Act, calling for the Illinois legislature to highlight the “Little Giant” and his actions as being in “the best interests of the Union.” Omelveny called for a resolution to “sustain Judge Douglas against all abolitionists and free-soilers in this state.” A string of further proposals ensued, as one Illinois Senator after another submitted their own resolutions. A fellow Democrat reiterated the arguments voiced by supporters of an Illinois state convention in 1824, offering a resolution that upheld state sovereignty over antislavery moralism. He declared “the right of the people to form themselves such a government as they may choose” to be “the birth-right of freemen...secured to us by the blood of our ancestors.” This sacred right, he believed, “ought to be extended to future generations, and no limitation ought to be applied to this power.” To these popular sovereignty Democrats, Illinois had indeed rebelled against the restriction placed upon her by the Northwest Ordinance, and had ultimately decided to prohibit slavery. The clause, itself, had been subject to the will of the people, who should never be bound by such imposed laws. Popular sovereignty supporters therefore “deemed[ed] the restriction of a geographical line, upon the right of

the people to form such a government as they may choose in regard to the question of slavery, as a gross violation of that sacred right.”³⁴

The division among Illinoisans’ approaches to the slavery issue, as Lincoln well knew, did not correlate to Whig and Democratic party membership. This fact appears in the records of the Illinois legislature immediately following the proposal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the U.S. Congress. Of the thirty-two members of the Illinois state Senate serving in 1854, only four were Whigs. Amid that sea of Democrats existed many antislavery representatives who proved unwilling to embrace popular sovereignty as the Democratic Party’s platform. John M. Palmer molded himself into a leading anti-Nebraska Democrat when he offered a substitute to Omelveny’s resolutions that supported the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 as “a satisfactory and final settlement of the subject of slavery.” Rather than praise the bill, Palmer declared that it “meets the unqualified condemnation and opposition of the Gen. Assembly.” Judd, meanwhile, refuted Douglas by proposing that the General Assembly support “the Missouri Compromise act...as a wise and beneficial enactment” that should “be preserved inviolate.”³⁵

John Detrich, meanwhile, sought to prevent an extended discussion of the Illinois General Assembly that revolved around slavery. He asked that their consideration of the various resolutions be postponed so as “to expedite legislative action on important measures now before the General Assembly.” The Speaker ruled his resolutions out of order, however, forcing the Illinois Senators to continue their discussion until they

³⁴ Extracts from Senate Journal, 1854, Box 5, John M. Palmer Papers I, ALPL.

³⁵ Ibid. Allegiance to the Missouri Compromise, and to the nation’s commitment to compromise in general, prompted many to both reject Douglas, and unite on a broad pro-compromise platform with other anti-Nebraskans. J. J. Cassel to Richard Yates, Feb. 20, 1854, Box 1, Richard Yates Collection, ALPL.

reached a final resolution. Pushing his colleagues to support the geographical ban on slavery embodied in the Missouri Compromise, Palmer submitted an amendment deeming the laws in that compromise and in the bill organizing Oregon Territory to be “wise and judicious” and asserted that they “ought to be maintained.” Burton Cook responded with his own amendment that highlighted “all of the compromises upon the subject of slavery as of binding force and obligation, to be honorably observed and strictly adhered to.” The Senate’s continued discussion of the Kansas-Nebraska bill displayed the recurring split between popular sovereignty Democrats and those who pushed for more solid guarantees against the extension of slavery. John M. Palmer ultimately became a crucial member of the Illinois Republican Party, interacting closely with Lincoln in the latter part of the decade. What Lincoln surely learned from Palmer, the debates within the Illinois state legislature, and in his interactions with other residents of the state, was the overwhelmingly effectiveness of Douglas’s attempts to brand antislavery advocates as abolitionists. By collapsing the distinction between moral antislavery and abolitionism, then casting popular sovereignty as an effective yet inoffensive method of keeping slavery out of the West, he convinced scores of anti-slave system southern migrants to Illinois to support the doctrine.³⁶

The writings of Charles Fletcher, who communicated his stance on popular sovereignty to revered Illinois politician Sidney Breese, point to the unique ability of popular sovereignty doctrine to capture the sentiments of northwesterners and entice them to believe they could carefully navigate around the volatile slavery issue. In several communications written in 1848, Fletcher intimated that “Slavery is a great evil,” and that the election of Lewis Cass would be the wisest course for the nation, since he would

³⁶ Extracts from Senate Journal, 1854, Box 5, John M. Palmer Papers I, ALPL.

secure free territory for white men rather than for slaveholders and their slaves. Fletcher cast opposition to Cass as stemming from his own “singular devotedness to the sovereignty of the people & their principles of democratic liberty.” The Whigs and aristocrats, he argued, “oppose him because he has always been in opposition to the few governing the many.” Fletcher vehemently denounced abolitionists and antislavery Whigs for “invading the rights of the South wantonly and unnecessarily.” He believed there was no reason to create “agitation on the subject of slavery,” as it might “create a revolution in the whole country by which every householder will suffer.” This “fanaticism” could and should be overcome by a national commitment to the doctrine of popular sovereignty, by which, he believed, slavery would slowly disappear.³⁷

Many Illinoisans echoed Fletcher’s sentiments, conveying an ambiguous but existent dislike for slavery and condemning abolitionism as an abhorrently radical doctrine. Their northwestern distrust for radicalism of all kinds—proslavery and antislavery alike—generated a fierce opposition to any party, person, or doctrine that might be tinged with radicalism. Because proslavery doctrine never took hold in Illinois as abolitionism did, most Illinoisans did not fear it would disrupt the nation. They perceived abolitionists as the main culprits for disrupting the nation’s peace and security through the slavery issue. When Lincoln re-focused on Illinois politics in 1849, references to abolitionism proved crucial in debates over Illinois candidates for elections and appointments. Richard T. Gill and L. T. Garth, two residents of Tremont, informed Lincoln that one of the men being considered for the postmaster position “is an avowed abolitionist” and should not receive the appointment. John H. Ball, however, “is a good whig and would give general satisfaction in this place.” Peter Menard similarly intimated

³⁷ Charles Fletcher to Sidney Breese, August 9, 1848, Box 1, Sidney Breese Papers, ALPL.

that his only objection to one candide [sic] was “that he is vastley [sic] impregnated with Abolitionism,” and “this is to me an insufferable objection.” As Democrat Benjamin Baldwin related in 1855, “nothing but Evil, and that continually, can be the result of the Election of an abolitionist.”³⁸

Most Douglas Democrats in Illinois appeared to firmly believe their party had become the bulwark of the Union, binding it together across sectional lines and offering the only safe route past the slavery problem. Lincoln, elated to learn from a letter he had intercepted that Douglas appeared to be losing ground in Illinois in 1854, relayed Democratic convictions that “we must elect a Nebraska U.S. Senator, or elect none at all.” Jason Riggin explained that “the contest, now going on in the northern states,” over the Kansas-Nebraska Act “lies at the foundation of the government; and the success of the democratic-nebrasky party is the only shure guarentee [sic] for the stability and safety of the Union.” Another Riggin family member reported one year later that upon hearing Stephen Douglas speak in St. Louis, “[h]e gave me some ideas in regard to the Nebraska-Kansas question that set my mind at ease on some points that I had not fully understood before. I came to the conclusion after listening to him, that he was all that I had heard of him, a very great little giant.” As W. D. Latham explicated, many people “of the western & South western States look upon him as the embodiment of the great principles of Nationality.” He captured the sentiments of many northwestern Democrats when he asserted that “Abolitionism and Nationality, are the political sentiments that will influence all—there is no middle ground for ‘fence-men’ to ride—a choice of one or the other must be made.” Like Lincoln, many southern-born settlers in Illinois perceived no

³⁸ Richard T. Gill and L. T. Garth to Abraham Lincoln, April 19, 1849, Peter Menard to Lincoln, April 15, 1849, LC; Benjamin Baldwin to John M. Palmer, Jan. 13, 1855, John M. Palmer II Papers, ALPL.

actual threat looming over them from their brethren in the South. They therefore focused their attention against abolitionism, while Lincoln, who believed himself better informed than they, directed his efforts toward defeating popular sovereignty.³⁹

The chief attraction of popular sovereignty was its perceived moderation on the slavery issue. Supporters' greatest weapon against political enemies, therefore, was the charge of radicalism. As Elijah P. Lovejoy had shown, those who professed to be moderates may indeed turn out to be unyielding radicals.⁴⁰ Popular sovereignty Democrats therefore wielded accusations of radicalism, built from a combination of honest fear and political fabrication, against antislavery zealots. A group of Tazewell County citizens communicated to Lincoln in May 1849 that one of the men he had recommended for the Springfield land office was being charged "with being an Abolitionist, a Drunkard, and a Gambler, with a view of defeating his appointment." The citizens defended King from these accusations and assured Lincoln that he remained capable of the post.⁴¹ In 1854, when Democrat Lyman Trumbull decided to oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he complained that his "warm friends in the South part of the state" had turned against him, and "have cried out abolition so much that if I was really a [William Lloyd] Garrison or a [Wendell] Philips they could not think worse of me than they do." Although many Illinois Democrats did leave the party and eventually join the Republicans in a public pledge against slavery's extension, most remained in, or returned to, the Democratic Party. Unlike Trumbull, many Democrats still believed their party would ensure "the triumph of Freedom over Slavery." Thomas S. Hick expressed such a

³⁹ *CW*, II:293–94; James Riggin to Augustus Riggin, Nov. 14, 1854, J. H. Riggin to A. R. Riggin, Oct. 11, 1855, Riggin Family Papers, ALPL; W. D. Latham to Charles Lanphier, Nov. 9, 1855, Lanphier Papers Box 1–1/2, ALPL.

⁴⁰ Ford, *A History of Illinois*, 234–35; Simon, *Freedom's Champion*.

⁴¹ Pekin, Tazewell County, Illinois, Citizens to Lincoln, May 1, 1849, LC.

sentiment to John McClernand in 1850, imparting his regret that some Democrats, apparently including Illinois's Democratic Governor William H. Bissell, had supported the Wilmot Proviso. Hick felt that "whether on slave Territory or free, whether defended by slave Holders or Free soilers; it was the Government of the American People, and reproach [for slavery] should not come from American Citizens." Perceiving the Democratic Party as the one truly national party, he therefore supported any slavery compromise that did not, in his opinion, trample upon the rights of the South with moral condemnations of slavery.⁴²

Such antagonism against those who vocally professed a hatred for slavery resulted in a general reluctance from many Democrats to break away from their party.⁴³ Fellow Democrats John M. Palmer and Lyman Trumbull experienced a backlash from their own party when they chose to oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act. W. D. Wyatt confided to Palmer in 1854 that "[n]o one here approves of your course by the Whigs and Abolitionists—real genuine abolitionists." Wyatt apologetically explained that he remained Palmer's "warm friend," and that everyone in Carrollton, Illinois, "knows here that others went for you who are Nebraska democrats—that is opposed to those opposing the measure." Thus, while some "speak of burning you in effigy," other constituents "are of a better spirit and are getting up and circulating petitions with a view to instruct you politely relative to the wishes of they party."⁴⁴

⁴² Lyman Trumbull to John M. Palmer, Nov. 23, 1854, Box 1, John M. Palmer II Papers; Thomas S. Hick to John McClernand, April 26, 1850, John A. McClernand Collection, ALPL.

⁴³ Furthermore, the ambiguousness of the term "abolitionist" led to its frequent misuse or abuse by many, regardless of party. T. Lyle Dickey, for example, characterized his own father as a "moderate Kentucky Abolitionist," who might prove "of use to you with some of the Abolitionists." T. Lyle Dickey to Lincoln, Nov. 19, 1854, LC.

⁴⁴ W. D. Wyatt to John Palmer, Jan. 11, 1854, Box 1, John M. Palmer II Papers, ALPL.

Nevertheless, 1854 proved a crucial turning point for the Democratic Party. Douglas Democrats' insistence that the Kansas-Nebraska Act be adopted as the official party position on the slavery issue bred indignation and resentment from many antislavery Democrats, who "determined not to swallow [it] as a new test of Democracy."⁴⁵ From 1854 to 1856, many of these Democrats waded uncertainly in the aftermath of Douglas's actions, attempting to shift the direction of their party or splitting off into different factions. Eventually, many left to join the Republicans. Unsure of what political party he should join in August 1855, Trumbull assured Owen Lovejoy of his commitment "to stay the spread of human slavery," but he also questioned "whether it would be advisable at this time to call a state convention of all those opposed to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise." Too many people feared the fusion movement directed by abolitionists, and therefore refused to join in it despite their antislavery convictions. "If a convention of the Democracy opposed equally to the spread of slavery, to abolition & to Know Nothingism, could be called," Trumbull advised, "we could, I think, get a respectable representation from this part of the state, and such a movement would probably damage the Nebraska democracy more than anything else which could be done." As fervently anti-abolitionist as he was anti-slavery, Trumbull believed a "large majority of the Democrat party are...opposed to the spread of slavery." A tactful redress of the issues, he implied, could turn the tide against Douglas and his pro-Nebraska faction.⁴⁶

Later, after Trumbull had become more explicit in his denunciation of the spread of slavery, John Palmer wrote to him that proslavery Democrats remained determined to

⁴⁵ Gustave Koerner to Judge Breese, Sept. 12, 1854, Sidney Breese to the Editor of the 'Reporter,' Oct. 28, 1854, Sidney Breese Papers, ALPL.

⁴⁶ Lyman Trumbull to Owen Lovejoy, Aug. 20, 1855, Lyman Trumbull Correspondence, ALPL.

reject him. Attempting to capture the sympathies of the broadly antislavery electorate, he offered Trumbull the idea that Colonel Thomas Hart Benton might succeed “as the candidate of the true Democracy” for president in 1856. Struggling to avoid both the treachery they perceived in the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the “abolitionizing tendency” of many antislavery activists, Trumbull and Palmer attempted to steer their party away from Stephen Douglas’s beloved piece of legislation. They did, indeed, find many supporters to join with them. As Palmer’s brother informed him: “I am pleased at your position on the Nebraska & Kansas Bill & hope you will not cave in like most the antis here are doing, not most but a few.” Evidently, the pressures of leaving the Democratic party caused some to waver, and others to push forward. David A. Smith of Jacksonville, uttering words of encouragement and advisement to the belabored John Palmer, insisted that he do all in his power to ensure their party put forward an anti-Nebraska candidate for Senate in Illinois. If they did not do so, he urged, “you must be the opposing candidate, & inscribe on your banner ‘An exterminating war against intemperance—A restoration of the Missouri Compromise.’ Do or die under this banner.”⁴⁷

Despite the risks involved, many Democrats did choose to speak out against popular sovereignty. One of the most visible defectors of the Democratic Party was William H. Bissell, who became Governor of Illinois in 1856. Bissell opposed popular sovereignty and committed himself to the non-extension of slavery into U.S. territories. He also exhibited views of the South that reflected Lincoln’s own. In his speech to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1850, Bissell labeled the claims radical southern representatives in U.S. Congress made that their constituents were prepared to overthrow

⁴⁷ David A. Smith to John M. Palmer, Sept. 18, 1854, LeRoy Palmer to John M. Palmer, June 1854, Box 1, John M. Palmer II Papers; John M. Palmer to Trumbull, Dec. 22, 1855, Lyman Trumbull Correspondence, ALPL.

the government if slavery were not further protected as outlandish and not truly representative of most southerners. Although his speech exuded a polite regard for these opinions, Bissell declared himself “slow, especially, to distrust [the patriotism] in the people of the generous South.” He then provided a series of arguments to assert that antislavery sentiment was not sectional, but national, and that the voices of those who opposed slavery also hailed from slave states such as Kentucky and Missouri. He echoed Missourian Thomas Hart Benton’s warning that a “small but active party in the extreme South” sought “a dismemberment of the Union in order to the establishment of a separate ‘southern confederacy.’” Nevertheless “the people,” he believed, “will defeat their designs; and in due time they will visit with just retribution those who have sought to mislead them.”⁴⁸

The expressions of discontent with the Kansas-Nebraska bill voiced by so many Whigs, free-soilers, and Democrats, surrounded Lincoln as he considered his own political future. Proslavery and proslavery-leaning opinions certainly existed in Illinois, but they remained exceptions. John Mathers, who once corresponded with Lincoln, voiced the common concern of non-slaveholding migrants who had fled from the South, asking whether “the few slave holders of this nation” shall “rule & govern this great republic to her injury, by spreading negro slavery over every foot of territory, which has been consecrate to freedom by our Fathers?” Should the Kansas-Nebraska Act allow “the domineering slave holder with his hundreds & thousands of slaves” to “take possession of these territories & thereby drive out the poor laboring white man?” Certainly, that had not been the intentions of the Founders, who through “the adoption of the Ordinance of

⁴⁸ William H. Bissell, *The Slave Question* ([Washington, D.C.]: Printed at the Congressional Globe Office, 1850).

1787” sought “to prevent the extension of slavery in this nation.” Mathers argued that since each territory held the right to make its own laws once it became a state, the people always had the opportunity to introduce slavery, at any time after statehood, in Illinois and the other free states. Thus “the people of Ill[inois] decided by vote which they would have—slavery or not. So in the case of Kansas & Nebraska if the Compromise had remained.” Because the Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed the territory to decide at such an early phase, it did not offer the people ample opportunity to exclude slavery therefrom.

A “Democratic Anti-Nebraska Committee” in Indiana made similar arguments against the act. Gathering together on the anniversary of the Northwest Ordinance’s passage in 1787, the meeting published a preamble and set of resolutions upholding the Ordinance and the Missouri Compromise as evidence that the Founders intended to halt the expansion of slavery. These Democratic party members echoed Illinoisan anti-Nebraska Democrats when they declared themselves “opposed to the extension of slavery” and against “the principles of the platform adopted by the self-styled Democratic convention of last May, held in this city, to further the Nebraska swindle.” Lyman Trumbull, despite his troubles in combatting anti-abolitionists, decided to run as an anti-Nebraska candidate for the U.S. Senate. He explained: “I thought the repeal of the Missouri compromise wrong & believed the mass of the People would think so too, if it was rightly understood.” Trumbull proved at least partially right, as he won the election by a majority of 2,700 votes.⁴⁹

In this political turmoil that enveloped the nation in 1854, anti-Nebraska Whigs, Democrats, and Free Soilers coalesced into tenuous combinations that took years to

⁴⁹ Speech by John Mathers, [1854?], John Mathers Papers; Lyman Trumbull to “Brother John,” Dec. 4, 1854, Lyman Trumbull Correspondence, ALPL.

develop into a major party organization. Throughout that year, Lincoln remained as uncertain about his future course as did Lyman Trumbull, considering himself an anti-Nebraska Whig. The “fragments on government” he composed, most likely in the months surrounding the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854, reveals a man digging for the very roots of the American republic’s relationship to slavery. Attempting to objectively consider popular sovereignty, though he had set himself in opposition to it his entire life, Lincoln carried the main conviction of popular sovereignty Democrats—that the people of a territory should have the power to make their own laws without the intrusion of the federal government—to its utmost extreme, asking whether the people should have any national government at all. “Why not each individual take to himself the whole fruit of his labor,” and remain free from the taxes, the services, and the laws inevitably imposed upon him by government? In response to his own query, Lincoln determined that government was merely “a combination of the people of a country to effect certain objects by join effort.” A structure built, maintained, and perpetuated by the people, American government’s “legitimate object” was “to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they can not, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, for themselves.” This included on the one hand the building and maintenance of public roads and schools, and providing care for children and the poor, and on the other hand protecting its people against and punishing perpetrators for “the injustice of men.”⁵⁰

Little other evidence of Lincoln’s thoughts remains from this period until he addressed the people of Illinois in his summer 1854 speeches against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In a letter marked “confidential” to John Palmer, whom Lincoln knew to be struggling under the weight of intraparty dissension following his disavowal of the

⁵⁰ *CW*, II:220–22.

Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln gave some indication why he chose to launch into the public arena again. Lincoln urged Palmer that he had a duty to explain to people why “you have determined not to swallow the wrong.” Regarding his own course of action, he explained: “[h]ad your party omitted to make Nebraska a test of party fidelity...I should have been quit, happy that Nebraska was to be rebuked at all events. I still should have voted for the whig candidate [for congress in the district], but I should have made no speeches, written no letters.” The Democratic Party’s embrace of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed Clay’s beloved Missouri Compromise and opened formerly free territories to slavery, threatened to turn Americans against the nation’s antislavery tradition and pave the way for the spread of slavery.⁵¹

Awakened to the real danger the slavery issue posed to the Union, Lincoln asserted his antislavery politics across Illinois, not only making speeches but proposing a set of resolutions to the Illinois legislature to repeal much, if not all, of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, while assisting fellow anti-Nebraska Illinoisans in their campaigns for office.⁵² Some of his greatest initial efforts were put forward on behalf of Richard Yates, a fellow Kentuckian-born Whig and son of Virginia parents, who, like Lincoln, had moved to the Springfield, Illinois, area in 1831. Apart from attending and graduating college, Yates had an upbringing that bore remarkable similarities to Lincoln’s. In letters Yates wrote to L. U. Reavis in 1870, he described his childhood in Kentucky, infatuation with Henry Clay, and his fathers’ decision “not to raise his family, then large, in a slave State.” After attending college in Jacksonville, Illinois, Yates embarked on a similar career in law and politics. Yates’s particular antislavery politics largely mirrored

⁵¹ *CW*, II: 227–28.

⁵² *CW*, II: 300–01.

Lincoln's, as well.⁵³ While serving in Congress in 1852 he defined himself as "in favor of a fugitive slave law to carry out the provisions of the Constitution," yet he refused to grant his support for this law in Congress unless southerners officially recognized the other pieces of the Compromise of 1850, which admitted California as a free state and abolished the slave trade in Washington, D.C. Yates's approach of accepting the entire Compromise of 1850 as a package that must be agreed upon by northerners and southerners alike was precisely Lincoln's method of dealing with the slavery problem at the time.⁵⁴ During that term he also delivered a speech on Western Interests in Congress that displayed the national spirit that pervaded the Northwest, and that had long encouraged northerners and southerners alike to settle within its bounds. Presenting the Illinois River as an equally significant tributary to the West as the mighty Mississippi, he demonstrated that there one "finds the Western man, the Southern man, and, of course, 'Brother Jonathan,' ...discussing stocks, finance, railroads, trade, agriculture, corn, cotton, and *codfish*; the compromise, secession, slavery, and, what is better, learning from each other that there is no good reason for the local animosities which have heretofore existed and exhibited themselves in alarming aspects, threatening to jar the pillars of the Union." Yates's speech, focused as much on the availability of land titles to settlers as the ethos of the West, resonated among Illinoisans.⁵⁵

⁵³ "The Death of Richard Yates, *The Inland Monthly* 5 (January 1874): 19–20, found in Box 5, Folder 2, Richard Yates Collection, SIU; John H. Krenkel, ed., *Richard Yates: Civil War Governor* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1966), 29, 39–40. Perhaps playing upon these similarities to Lincoln as well as reaching out to his Kentuckian-born constituents, Yates mentioned in an 1860 campaign speech that he "learned the lessons of Republicanism in a log school house in Ky...from Washington and Franklin...Webster and Clay." "Part of Campaign Speech," Box 4, Folder 5, Richard Yates Collection, SIU.

⁵⁴ Richard Yates to Simeon Francis, Box 1, Folder 2, Richard Yates Collection, SIU.

⁵⁵ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 32nd Cong., 1st Sess., 474; Jason Berdan, who kept Yates apprised of the political feelings of his district while he served in Congress, informed him that his speech "has raised

Though Yates's speeches and actions in the 1850–1852 Congress ushered him to re-election for the following term, he lost his seat after the political turmoil that followed in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. While serving out his second term as U.S. congressman, Yates became embroiled in the discussions and debates over the proposed Act in early 1854. Evidently learning from J. B. Turner, a well-connected Illinoisan who had migrated from Massachusetts, that the people of his district had largely denounced the bill, he explained with relief that “I took grounds against it before I had heard from one of them.”⁵⁶ As it turned out, Douglas Democrats were able to gain enough support in that district to threaten Yates's chances for another term in late 1854. Alerted to this danger, Lincoln made great efforts to help all anti-Nebraska candidates, but Yates in particular. The two frequently corresponded in 1854 as Lincoln attempted to drum up popular support for this fellow Kentuckian-born opponent of popular sovereignty. His efforts ultimately failed, as Yates lost his bid for re-election, possibly in part due to rumors that he had secretly joined the nativist Know Nothing organization.⁵⁷

Throughout that fall, Lincoln delivered a set of speeches on the Kansas-Nebraska Act that built upon his experiences in Illinois and in Congress and laid the foundation of the arguments he would later articulate in the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Debates. In these speeches he provided two justifications for his opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act: that it violated America's sacred compromises, and that popular sovereignty functioned as a means to spread slavery—not democracy—across the nation's territories. He illustrated both these convictions in the form of a parable in September 1854, imagining

you in the estimation of fair men of opposite politics.” Jason Berdan to Richard Yates, July 12, 1852, Box 1, Folder 2, Richard Yates Collection, SIU.

⁵⁶ *CW*, II: 229; Richard Yates to J. B. Turner, April 14, 1854, Jonathan Baldwin Turner Papers, UIUC.

⁵⁷ *CW*, II: 226, 227–28, 284–87.

that two men had made a pact that the first should own a particular parcel of land. The second, though he had originally consented to the agreement, became envious and tore down his fences, allowing his cattle to invade the first man's land in clear violation of the pact. When the first man angrily objected, the second explained that "I have taken down your fence; but nothing more. It is my true intent and meaning not to drive my cattle into your meadow, nor to exclude them therefrom, but leave them perfectly free to form their own notions of the feed, and to direct their movements in their own way!" Through this illustration, Lincoln conveyed his sense that the Kansas-Nebraska Act both violated the sacred Missouri Compromise and delivered slavery when it promised freedom. His characterization of the parable's second man as "both a knave and a fool" served as a thinly veiled allusion to Stephen Douglas.⁵⁸

In his October speech at Peoria, Lincoln highlighted the creation of, respect for, and adherence to compromises essential to maintaining the Union. Douglas's callous disregard for the Missouri Compromise clearly touched a nerve and caused Lincoln to distrust the Little Giant's motives. "Slavery may or may not be established in Nebraska," he explained, but if the Kansas-Nebraska Act is not repealed, "we shall have repudiated...the SPIRIT of COMPROMISE; for who after this will ever trust in a national compromise?" This, to Lincoln, was the Act's most damning feature—not the introduction of slavery. He quite accurately feared that henceforth, each section would refuse to accept compromise—the trustworthy last resort the nation had turned to in its most divided days—after Douglas had proven that compromises would be broken. At this moment, Lincoln still clung to the hope that the Missouri Compromise could be

⁵⁸ This argument originally appeared in the *Illinois Journal*, where Lincoln and John Calhoun continued their debate. *CW*, II: 229–30.

reinstated, and “the national faith, the national confidence, [and] the national feeling of brotherhood” restored. He therefore continued to uphold his conviction to anti-slavery extension and compromise on the same level.⁵⁹

Lincoln thus retraced the history of the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850, emphasizing the mutual agreement of North and South, Democrats and Whigs, upon these compromises and vowing to uphold them. Although the compromise of 1850 had passed as a series of acts rather than as an entire package, as Clay had desired, Lincoln asserted that it nevertheless constituted a whole set of agreements that must be followed together. Offering Daniel Webster’s definition of “compromise” as “to adjust and settle a difference, by mutual agreement with concessions of claims by the parties,” Lincoln argued that the acts of 1850 fell under this designation and had been respected as a compromise by the people. Lincoln firmly believed that this entailed a sincere adherence to each piece of the compromise, regardless of one’s personal feelings. With respect the Compromise of 1850, he argued, this entailed support of the fugitive slave law and other provisions despised by northerners. He believed in honoring these concessions to the South “not grudgingly, but fully, and fairly.”⁶⁰

To illustrate the widespread national accord with the Missouri Compromise and similar agreements between North and South, Lincoln quoted from Stephen Douglas himself. In doing so, Lincoln insisted that he did not intend to cast Douglas as a flip-flopping politician but sought “merely to show the high estimate placed on the Missouri Compromise by all parties up to so late as the year 1849.” In light of his repeal of the

⁵⁹ *CW*, II: 272.

⁶⁰ *CW*, II: 230–31, 256, 233.

Missouri Compromise line, however, the Little Giant's previous statements appeared quite damaging. In 1849 he had gone so far as to say: "All the evidences of public opinion at that day, seemed to indicate that this Compromise had been canonized in the hearts of the American people, as a sacred thing which no ruthless hand would ever be reckless enough to disturb." Although Lincoln knew releasing such statements couldn't hurt his own crusade against Douglas, he truly did seek to account for the vast change that seemed to usher in the Kansas-Nebraska Act—for the people's sudden willingness to discard a compromise, and therefore all future compromises, it seemed, in favor of popular sovereignty.⁶¹

Lincoln's answer to his own question ultimately shaped itself into the beginning of a Slave Power argument. The reason why compromise had established itself early in our nation's founding and continued to resonate so forcefully today, Lincoln asserted, was because slavery was an exception to the Constitution that statesmen had agreed to protect until it died out or a plan of emancipation could be approved. "The theory of our government is Universal Freedom," he stated. Whereas the clause "'All men are created free and equal'" was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, "[t]he world 'Slavery' is not found in the Constitution." The only "legislation that has recognized or tolerated its extension, has been associated with a compensation—a Compromise—showing that it was something that moved forward, not by its own right, but by its wrong." The Missouri Compromise had allowed slavery into the state of Missouri and every other territory that then belonged to the U.S. below 36 degrees 30'. Slavery would meanwhile be barred from all existing territories above the line, including the large area that would become the states of Kansas and Nebraska. Upholding Henry Clay as "the

⁶¹ *CW*, II: 252.

leading spirit in the making the Missouri compromise,” Lincoln refuted Douglas’s charge that Clay and Daniel Webster would lend their support to the Kansas-Nebraska Act if they had lived to see it.⁶²

Lincoln was convinced that most Americans in both 1776 and 1854 believed slavery immoral. Before the crowd at Peoria, Illinois, he confidently asserted: “it is very certain that the great mass of mankind...consider slavery a great moral wrong.” Lincoln therefore invoked Jefferson and the Founding Fathers in the same way congressional colleagues had done so throughout the 30th Congress. Mirroring their statements, he called forth “the fathers of our republic, the vindicators of our liberty, and the framers of our government,” and pointed to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 “as the best exposition of their views of slavery as an institution.” Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, “the most distinguished politician of our history; a Virginian by birth and continued residence, and withal, a slave-holder,” had personally urged his state to cede the Northwest Territory to the U.S. and for the new nation to prohibit slavery within its bounds. Realizing the dangerous moral ground on which the Kansas-Nebraska Act rested, with its refusal to determine slavery immoral, Lincoln explained that the fathers had never wavered in their recognition of its immorality. “Necessity”—not “Right”—had been “the only argument [the Founders] ever admitted in favor of slavery.” For this reason, any mention of the horrible institution was “hid[den] away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death.”⁶³

⁶² *CW*, II:245, 282.

⁶³ *CW*, II: 281, 249, 240, 274.

This retelling of America's early history cast the Kansas-Nebraska principle in bold relief, depicting popular sovereignty and its appraisal of slavery as a "sacred right," as a recent development that directly contradicted the intentions of the Founding Fathers. "Let no one be deceived," he cried. "The spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska, are utter antagonisms; and the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter." He called upon his fellow countrymen to "turn slavery from its claims of 'moral right,' back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of 'necessity.'"⁶⁴ One newspaper paraphrased Lincoln's Springfield address on October 4, which explained how different the Founders' convictions were to "the new-fangled doctrines of popular rights, invented in these degenerate latter days to cloak the spread of slavery." Most importantly, Lincoln saw that policy as a reversal of an antislavery trend begun with the Ordinance of 1787 but carried forward by Clay and his Missouri Compromise. "[A]s a glance at the map will show, the Missouri line is a long way farther South than the Ohio," Lincoln explained. A clear "principle of jogging southward" had kept the nation on a path of eventually preventing slavery's extension ever since 1776.⁶⁵

Lincoln recalled his northwestern roots in support of these arguments against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which gained an incredible amount of support from his section of the country. He described himself at Peoria as "no less than National in all the positions I may take," and willing to prove his reverence for the Union first and foremost to all who considered his convictions "narrow, sectional and dangerous to the Union." Keenly aware of the anti-abolitionist sentiment that threatened the success of any anti-Nebraska man,

⁶⁴ *CW*, II: 275.

⁶⁵ *CW*, II: 240. At Peoria, Lincoln reiterated that "Jefferson never thought of; their own father never thought of; they never thought of" their oppression in not being legally able to bring slaves with them into free territory, until Douglas placed the thought in their heads. *CW*, II: 250.

whether Democrat or Whig, he urged his fellow Illinoisans to “Stand with anybody that stands RIGHT. Stand with him while he is right and PART with him when he goes wrong. Stand WITH the abolitionist in restoring the Missouri Compromise; and stand AGAINST him when he attempts to repeal the fugitive slave law.”⁶⁶ Perceiving this position as the moderate northwestern one, Lincoln believed the Wilmot Proviso was an essentially northwestern document that should appeal to the masses of white migrants who had entered that free territory seeking great opportunities for advancement. Likely drawing upon the statements his fellow congressmen had made from 1847 to 1849, he put forward the successes of the northwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin as solid proof that the Ordinance of 1787 had been wise policy. Standing on the northwestern ground of his state in 1854, he asked: “If the ordinance of ’87 did not keep slavery out of the north west territory, how happens it that the north west shore of the Ohio river is entirely free from it; while the south east shore, less than a mile distant...is entirely covered with it?” He declared that the Northwest “is now what Jefferson foresaw and intended—the happy home of teeming millions of free, white, prosperous people, and no slave amongst them.” In Illinois’s capital of Springfield, he asserted: “No States in the world have ever advanced as rapidly in population, wealth, the arts and appliances of life, and now have such promise of prospective greatness, as the very States that were born under the ordinance of ’87.” The prosperity of this land, freed from slavery, was precisely what had inspired him to vote for the Wilmot Proviso “at least forty times.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *CW*, II: 248–49, 273.

⁶⁷ *CW*, II:277, 241

The proviso, he argued, was meant not for the benefit of the black man but for the success of the white man. “Slave States are places for poor white people to remove FROM; not to remove TO,” he urged. “New free States are the places for poor people to go to and better their condition,” as proven by the immense prosperity of the Northwest. Lincoln thus thought the Wilmot Proviso represented a truly national piece of legislation. He continued to believe that “human nature” informed men of the immorality of slavery, and that most men would oppose the extension of slavery. To support his arguments, Lincoln was careful to qualify for his fellow Illinoisans that the Wilmot Proviso only prevented the extension of slavery, and did not pertain to the institution as it existed in the slave states.⁶⁸ In further explication of the Proviso’s nationality, Lincoln intoned that unlike the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Wilmot’s legislation had not “abandoned the Missouri Compromise and authorised its destruction.” It left all lands covered by previous compromises alone and merely applied itself to additional territories acquired after the Mexican-American War. While popular sovereignty advocates had trampled across Clay’s beloved compromise, proponents of the Wilmot Proviso “have held the Missouri Compromise as a sacred thing.”⁶⁹

Lincoln therefore castigated Douglas and his Act for not only contradicting the convictions and legacy of the Founders but also for failing to provide the freedoms it had promised. The legislation did not truly allow the people to decide whether slavery should or should not inhabit those lands, Lincoln argued. Rather, it made them “as open to slavery as Mississippi or Arkansas were when they were territories.”⁷⁰ Lincoln frequently restated his contention that the repeal of the Missouri Compromise embedded with the

⁶⁸ *CW*, II: 268, 271.

⁶⁹ *CW*, II: 241, 258.

⁷⁰ *CW*, II: 229–33.

Kansas-Nebraska Act did not promote greater democratic freedom for white men but actually limited it by “practically” acting on behalf of slavery, “recognising it, endorsing it, propagating, it, extending it.” As proof, Lincoln pointed to all those states that had not been subject to federal legislation outlawing slavery. Of these slave states, five were above the Missouri compromise line, and in none of these rather mountainous, northern-lying areas had “popular sovereignty” or natural climate kept slavery out. He urged his listeners to support a measure that would keep the institution out of all future U.S. states until 40,000 inhabitants had settled therein. Otherwise, slavery would inevitably lay claim to all U.S. territories, and division and bloodshed would reign as settlers fought one another over slavery and freedom. The intended effects of Douglas’s Act—ensuring the “sacred right of self-government”—would never be realized; instead, “the grossest violation of it” would inevitably result.⁷¹

Ultimately, Lincoln concluded, the only way he should ever consent to vote for or support the Kansas-Nebraska Act was if it truly represented “a great Union-saving measure.” At the end of 1854, as he pondered the dire developments that occurred in the wake of the Great Triumvirate’s death, Lincoln admitted that “[m]uch as I hate slavery, I would consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to any GREAT evil, to avoid a GREATER one.” He concluded, however, that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was the very opposite of a Union-saving measure, producing only discord and violence when it should provide unity and peace. Its ultimate origination, he believed, lay rooted in the growing shoots of a dangerous proslavery movement that had captured the southern elite. The proslavery contingent, “having exhausted its share of the [Missouri Compromise] bargain, demands an abrogation of the Compromise and a re-

⁷¹ *CW*, II: 243, 239.

division of the property,” he warned. The “declared indifference” voiced by Douglas merely hid a “covert real zeal for the spread of slavery.”⁷²

Perceiving Douglas as a mere lackey for southern slaveholders, Lincoln believed his Kansas-Nebraska Act utilized demagoguery to convince non-slaveholding southerners and northwesterners that popular sovereignty, rather than the anti-slavery extension pledge of the Wilmot Proviso, most naturally protected their interests. His perception of Douglas as a designing demagogue stemmed directly from his conversations and familiarity with northwesterners in Illinois, and with southern slaveholders in Congress. From these sets of experiences, Lincoln understood that many white southerners fled from the South for the opportunity to settle in the free Northwest. He remained convinced that the southern slaveholding congressmen of even his own Whig Party did not accurately represent the majority of the white South, and he believed that most white men in America, North or South, East or West, preferred free territory to slave. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln sprang into action in an attempt to disabuse his fellow non-slaveholders of the notion that popular sovereignty granted them greater democratic freedoms. Those efforts would continue until his election as president in 1860.

⁷² *CW*, II: 270, 241, 255.

Chapter Six

The Battle against Popular Sovereignty, 1855–1860

The divisions between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas drawn out in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates loomed larger than the two individuals who stood on the stages of Illinois, each hurling accusations while shielding himself from glancing blows from the other. Both men believed the Northwest would be crucial to deciding the presidential contest of 1860, and each man approached the other as his single major opponent. Both Lincoln and Douglas believed their respective stances on the slavery issue reached out to all parts of the nation and represented the two camps into which the people would ultimately fall into. Though Douglas knew a portion of the Democratic Party would never support him, he nevertheless believed he would win the nomination in 1860, with much of the South behind him. Lincoln, meanwhile, derided Douglas's grand designs and perceived the Little Giant as little more than a puppet used by the South but then to be thrown away when no longer needed. Lincoln never thought the South would succeed in a secession movement.

Indeed, Lincoln did not really see one South. He saw a South divided, its population split not only by race but by class. The majority of the South's white population, he knew, did not own slaves. When he considered them, he thought of the southerners he knew—those who had migrated to Illinois. Whereas droves of southerners had entered into free territory, few northerners, it seemed, had chosen to settle permanently in slave territory. He feared that time could change this, and that Douglas, after years of attracting northerners to popular sovereignty, could convince them that slavery was not a moral question. Long into the future, if Douglas was successful enough,

this doctrine would deliver a majority into the hands of the proslavery southern radicals who would capitalize on Douglas's successes by opening all U.S. territories and states to slavery. Lincoln envisioned this treacherous scenario as early as 1854. It prompted him to directly involve himself in politics again, to make two unsuccessful runs for the U.S. Senate, and to engage in a series of debates with Stephen Douglas that gained national attention in late 1858. Throughout this time, Lincoln received further information about the South that convinced him the proslavery element was gaining ground but that non-slaveholders would never gather behind purely proslavery expansionist agenda, let alone a secessionist movement. He therefore focused almost exclusively on defeating Douglas, whom he continued to consider, through 1860, the most dangerous agent of proslavery radicalism that existed in the Union.

Although some Illinoisans shared in Lincoln's antipathy to the Little Giant, vast numbers shared Stephen Douglas's conviction that his course on the slavery issue would whisk the nation away from impending warfare and secure her safely upon a set of eternal principles that had existed since the earliest days of the nation. Douglas's confidence rested upon his understanding both of migrants to the Northwest and of nonslaveholding southerners. He provided a history of the Northwest Ordinance that struck at the core of many migrants, reverberating the sentiments of settlers in 1824, and their descendants in the 1850s.¹ "It is a curious fact," Douglas remarked in Congress in 1854, "that so long as Congress said the territory of Illinois should not have slavery, she actually had it," and then when the settlers formed a Constitution and had the right to act as they pleased, "the people of Illinois, of their own free will and accord, provided for a

¹ See Robert W. Johannsen, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, 150th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42–48, 97–98, 126–28, 187, 216, for Douglas's retelling of the history of slavery in the U.S.

system of emancipation.” Though naturally antislavery, Douglas explained, “the people there regard[ed] [the Ordinance] as an invasion of their rights.”² In addition to witnessing his doctrines win the sympathies of southern-born residents of the Northwest, Douglas also won the explicit support of men in the South. He received the endorsement of those such as T. M. Rogers, who wrote to an Illinoisan in 1851 that “If your man Douglas is nominated for the Presidency” and supports the acquisition of Cuba, nonintervention of the federal government in the slave states, and the 1850 compromise, “I think he will carry every southern state except S. Carolina.” Drawing upon the sentiments of his fellow southerners, Rogers sincerely believed popular sovereignty resonated with the South.³ As a resident of Shawneetown, Illinois, explained, Illinois had always held a close relationship with the South, “laboring to put down the bad men in our part of the state,” to keep “the abolitionists off Tennessee & the South generally.”⁴ Later, when Douglas fought against the “fusion” of various antislavery northerners in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he and many of his cohorts genuinely believed that “Abolitionism and Nationality” were “the political sentiments that will influence all—there is no middle ground for ‘fence-men’ to ride—a choice of one or the other must be made.”⁵

The bright optimism Douglas and his Democrats expressed, however, did not outshine that of Lincoln and the “anti-Nebraskans” who opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. While Douglasites pressed onward in full confidence that popular sovereignty rested on great principles that would carry the Union safely through any crisis, even one revolving around slavery, Lincoln supporters grew equally certain that a pledge against

² *Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., 279.

³ T. M. Rogers to August Riggin, September 5, 1851, Riggin Family Papers, ALPL.

⁴ Sam Marshall to John A. McClernand, April 24, 1850, John A. McClernand Collection, ALPL.

⁵ W. D. Latham to Charles Lanphier, Nov. 9, 1855, Lanphier Box 1-1/2, ALPL.

the extension of slavery would guarantee the preservation of the nation. The correspondence to and from Lincoln during this period, though filled with typical political maneuverings, indicated that whereas the Whig Party had always held a very small place in Illinois politics, the new campaign against the Kansas-Nebraska Act promised a new era of anti-Democratic feeling in the state. Isaac Bailey expressed the outrage many, both Whig and Democrat, felt when Douglas declared the Missouri Compromise repealed. “He was onse heard loudely to exclaim that no ruthless hand would ever be base enough to desturb that compact,” Bailey informed a relative. “And lo his ruthless hand performed the act,” allowing slavery’s spread to free territories and disturbing the national peace.⁶ E. W Downer similarly revealed to Trumbull that although he had long been “an old friend & admirer” of Douglas, and still remained a Democrat, his political support for the party leader fell away “after Douglass turned Traitor to freedom,” and “I plainly saw that either Slavery or Freedom had to become National.”⁷ Once Lincoln began making speeches against the Act in mid-1854, he received numerous invitations to speak across the state, alerting him to the realization that the anti-Nebraskans needed a vocal leader who could articulate the opposition’s views. Many of these invitations came from Whigs who, like Lincoln, sought to fuse with other anti-Nebraska groups while maintaining the integrity and structure of the Whig Party.⁸

The positive feedback Lincoln received after delivering his 1854 speeches led to a general enthusiasm among many anti-Nebraskans for his possible election to the U.S.

⁶ Isaac Bailey to Josiah Bailey, May 22, 1855, Bailey Family Papers, UIUC.

⁷ E. W. Downer to Trumbull, Mar. 17, 1856, Trumbull Correspondence, ALPL.

⁸ Abraham Jonas to Lincoln, September 16, 1854, William H. Randolph to Lincoln, September 29, 1854, Richard L. Wilson to Lincoln, Oct. 20, 1854, and A.C. Gibson to Lincoln, Nov. 30, 1854, LC.

Senate.⁹ Lincoln knew his popularity stemmed from his firm yet moderate stance on slavery within the anti-Nebraska coalition. Kentucky-born Hugh Lamaster considered Richard Yates and Abraham Lincoln two main contenders for the Senate who could “harmonize” the anti-Nebraskans, and since “we want some one that can stand up to the little Giant,” Lincoln appeared the more favorable of the two. Albert Jones, meanwhile, pointed out that his “strongly Whig—strongly anti Douglass” district was even “more strongly anti-abolition” and thus required a moderate candidate. These expressions of deep regard for Lincoln spurred him to run for U.S. Senate in November 1854.¹⁰ Significantly, Lincoln decided against throwing his lot with the newly organized Republican Party, which at the time appeared to be managed by abolitionists, and ran instead as an anti-Nebraska Whig. As Lincoln informed Ichabod Coddington, an abolitionist Republican who had written to him on November 13, 1854, requesting his presence at the Republican State Central Committee, he did not believe himself radical enough for that organization. Lincoln intimated that though “I suppose my opposition to the principle of slavery is as strong as that of any member of the Republican party...I had also supposed that the extent to which I feel authorized to carry that opposition, practically, was not at all satisfactory to that party.” Throughout the 1850s, Lincoln persisted in the belief that a

⁹ At that time, senators were elected by the state legislature. Lincoln, therefore, did not seriously consider running for the seat until he confirmed that many of the anti-Nebraska candidates for the state legislature had won in November 1854. Donald, *Lincoln*, 179; White, Jr., *A. Lincoln*, 107. Henry Grove to Lincoln, Nov. 18, 1854, Jesse O. Norton to Lincoln, Dec. 12, 1854, AC Gibson to Lincoln, Nov. 30, 1854, Hugh Lamaster to Lincoln, Dec. 11, 1854, LC. Lincoln was actually elected on November 7, 1854, to represent Sangamon County in the Illinois General Assembly, but declined the office in pursuit of larger ambitions. *CW*, II: 287–88.

¹⁰ Hugh Lamaster to Lincoln, Dec. 11, 1854, Albert G. Jones to Lincoln, Nov. 22, 1854, LC. Departing from the hesitancy he had exhibited in 1849, Lincoln immediately penned letters to a number of individuals explicitly asking them for their support in his bid for the U.S. Senate seat. See, for example, *CW*, II: 286, 292.

moderate antislavery stance most adequately represented both his opinions and the course that the nation should take.¹¹

Lincoln steadfastly held to this position because he believed it adequately characterized central Illinois, which was a melting pot of southerners, northerners, and foreigners who had all settled there and now lived among one another. By holding this center position he hoped he could convince both the northern and southern portions of the state to support him. Throughout his efforts to win the Senate race in late 1854 and early 1855, he often applied to central Illinoisans and especially southern-born Illinoisans for support.¹² Though Lincoln had political connections in northern Illinois, he became worried that “there must be something wrong” in Chicago, where he had expected to receive much support. Writing to Whig ally Elihu B. Washburne in mid-December 1854 during his U.S. Senate campaign, Lincoln requested Washburne to contact John Wentworth about anti-Nebraska sentiments in that part of the state.¹³ Supporters in northern Illinois frequently reminded Lincoln that he was no abolitionist and stood on ground that disturbed antislavery purists. Thomas B. Talcott, for example, intimated that his brother was an “abolitionist of the Lovejoy stamp and has been for several years,” and that he and men of his principles sought to elect Owen Lovejoy or Ichabod Coddington rather than a moderate like Lincoln or Yates. Previously, in October 1854, Chicagoan Richard L. Wilson had pointed to the gulf that separated a southern-born central Illinoisan like Lincoln from northern Illinoisans, chiding Lincoln that he should travel to

¹¹ Donald, *Lincoln*, 280; Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 34; Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 73–75; Ichabod Coddington to Abraham Lincoln, Nov. 13, 1854, LC; *CW*, II: 288.

¹² *CW*, II: 290, 86, 288, 89.

¹³ *CW*, II: 293.

Chicago “to learn a little of the Northern Light.”¹⁴ As Washburne explained, northern Illinoisans objected to Lincoln because “it is alleged that the Springfield influence has always been against us in the north, and that if you should be elected the north would be overlooked for the center and south part of the State.” Lincoln, “astonishe[d]” by this news, explained that as a state representative of Sangamon County for eight years, he had never known the central and northern counties to disagree on major policy concerns. He assured Washburne that as a U.S. Senator he would never grant preference to a particular part of the state over the rest. Nevertheless, when prompted by northern Illinoisans to rescind his commitment to upholding the fugitive slave law, Lincoln continually refused, citing his allegiance to all compromises between North and South.¹⁵

Although Washburne and other committed antislavery Illinoisans pled with Lincoln to make concessions to the “free soil element,” he refused to alter his position. From 1854 to 1860, his antislavery stance remained largely the same, though he developed a more mature and effective defense of that platform over time, and he continued to assert the non-extension of slavery, as well as adherence to all previous compromises and the Constitution.¹⁶ Thus, when Jesse O. Norton queried: “Are you bound to stand by every thing in the Compromise measures of 1850? Couldn’t you concede the [the free soilers] a modification of the Fugitive Slave Act?” Lincoln refused

¹⁴ Thomas B. Talcott to Abraham Lincoln, Dec. 14, 1854, Richard L. Wilson to Lincoln, Oct. 20, 1854, LC.

¹⁵ Elihu B. Washburne to Lincoln, Dec. 12, 1854, Washburne to Lincoln, Dec. 20, 1854, LC; *CW*, II: 295.

¹⁶ Eric Foner puts it another way, explaining: “By 1852 Lincoln had developed antislavery ideas but not a coherent antislavery ideology; he had cast antislavery votes but had not yet devised a way to pursue antislavery goals within the political system.” Lincoln’s antislavery politics changed; his personal views on slavery did not. Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 62.

to follow through on such advice that he must extend his antislavery principles to contradict the nation's sacred compromises.¹⁷

By 1854 Lincoln had formed the foundation of a political platform that he would advocate for the rest of the decade. Though certainly disappointed by his failure to win the Senate seat that year, he contented himself with the knowledge that his defeat had been brought about less from lack of genuine support than by political machination. Indeed, after receiving the most votes of any candidate on the first ballot, Lincoln well understood that his position had resonated among Illinoisans.¹⁸ Furthermore, as Davis ardently asserted to F. W. Rockwell that March, nobody had met and matched Stephen Douglas on the stump but Lincoln, “and Lincoln discussed the subject with Douglass everywhere.” No matter who represented Illinois's interests in the national legislature, it was Lincoln who had proven himself capable of combatting—perhaps even defeating—the Little Giant.¹⁹

As “Anti-Nebraska” Democrats, Whigs, Free-Soilers and Know-Nothings struggled to determine their future course on the slavery issue, the waning days of 1854 turned into the year 1855, and the very term “anti-Nebraska” began to seem like an anachronism.²⁰ It persisted in political culture for the next several years, despite the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854, and continued to define the broad outlines of a group dominated by northerners who despised the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and its replacement with popular sovereignty in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of

¹⁷ Elihu B. Washburne to Lincoln, Dec. 26, 1854, Jesse O. Norton to Lincoln, Jan. 20, 1855, Henry Grove to Lincoln, Nov. 18, 1854, LC.

¹⁸ *CW*, II: 304–07.

¹⁹ David Davis to F. W. Rockwell, Mar. 4, 1855, David Davis Letters and Papers, ALPL.

²⁰ As Michael F. Holt explains, “there was no clear realignment of voters or reorganization of parties on the basis of the slavery issue in 1854 and 1855.” The Know Nothings, Whigs, and Free-Soilers all rushed to capitalize on anti-Nebraska sentiment and incorporate new members into their respective parties. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 158.

1854. “So far as [it] relates to the atrocious wrong, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise,” Augustus Adams admitted to Lincoln, “the act has been perpetrated.” Its anti-Nebraska enemies therefore sought now to “undo the wrong that has already been perpetrated and guard against the recurrence of similar acts in the future.” Despite his comforting recognition that the U.S. Senate battle amounted to just the first skirmish in a prolonged war with the Democrats, and his reluctance to join a radical Republican Party, Lincoln knew that the “anti-Nebraskans” must fuse themselves together into a more permanent party organization in order to defeat popular sovereignty and prevent the extension of slavery. He had keenly recognized the problems of keeping together a loosely bound coalition of anti-Nebraskans when he had run his Senate race.²¹ Surely, as he pondered the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and remembered Henry Clay’s course on the slavery issue, he considered his own statement, voiced in his eulogy of Henry Clay, that “the man who is of neither party, is not—cannot be, of any consequence.”²²

In August 1855 the Illinoisan expressed his sense of displacement. By that time, he sensed that the anti-Nebraskans would not become absorbed by a growing Whig Party but would form a new organization of their own. Yet at that time, the two new organizations—the Republicans and the Know Nothings—did not appear to fit Lincoln’s agenda. He confided to Speed, “I think I am a whig; but others say there are no whigs, and that I am an abolitionist.” He admitted that as a congressman he had frequently voted for the Wilmot Proviso, but “I never heard of any one attempting to unwhig me for that,”

²¹ Augustus Adams to Abraham Lincoln, Dec. 17, 1854, LC. Jesse O. Norton’s letter to Abraham Lincoln, Dec. 12, 1854, LC, described the almost absurd number of factions and divisions within the anti-Nebraska camp.

²² *CW*, II: 126.

and “I now do no more than oppose the extension of slavery.” Summarizing his moderate antislavery sentiments to his closest friend, Lincoln declared that he was not a Know-Nothing. “How could I be? How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that ‘all men are created equal.’ We now practically read it ‘all men are created equal, except negroes.’ When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics.’”²³

By May 1856, as the Republican Party gained increasing strength and incorporated more moderate antislavery members, Lincoln replaced his hesitancy with confidence that the organization could assert a moderate doctrine that should appeal to a large portion of the Union. Therefore, when law partner William Herndon signed Lincoln’s name to a “Call for Republican Convention” in Sangamon County, Lincoln consented and pledged his support for the new party. The call to which his name had been signed, far from outlining abolitionist intentions, rather appealed to all those “opposed to the Repeal of the Missouri Compromise...opposed to the present Administration [of James Buchanan]...and who are in favor of restoring the administration of the General Government to the Policy of Washington and Jefferson.” A crucial reason why Lincoln waited until the Republican Party seemed to bear, or at least held the potential to endorse, a more conservative antislavery platform than its early reputation had indicated, was his belief that as an antislavery southern-born central Illinoisan, he was able to influence both southerners and northerners. Throughout the 1850s he maintained this confidence not only because of his popularity in Illinois, but

²³ *CW*, II:320–23.

also because the information he gathered about the South buttressed it. What he learned of the South supported his conception of the region as a slave-based society in which the white nonslaveholder's natural self-interest and desire to rise was stifled by a slaveholding class bearing an oligarchic tendency to amass wealth in slaves and land as it achieved total political control. This information reached Lincoln from a variety of sources: the continued migration of southerners to the Northwest, literature produced by southerners during this period, and correspondence with southerners he knew.²⁴

Though the period of heaviest in-migration to Illinois had passed by 1850, new settlers still arrived in the state from the North and the South. The northwestern state was filled with people on the move, from new settlers arriving, to old ones moving on to other western states, and others simply passing through on their way to further destinations. This migration, ever-present around Lincoln while he resided in Illinois, was not simply the story of others, but a personal story of his and his family's own travails. Reminders of his family's migratory course occasionally sprang from his kin. Following his father's death in 1851, Lincoln's stepbrother informed him that he was considering moving to Missouri. Lincoln's indignant reply, resplendent with frustration at John Johnston's constant attempts to live as idle a life as possible, revealed his own resolute conviction that free states offered the most and best opportunities to any man genuinely seeking to improve his economic circumstances. "What can you do in Missouri, better than here?" he asked. "Will any body there, any more than here, do your work for you?"²⁵ With this question Lincoln betrayed his understanding of white nonslaveholders. Though a

²⁴ *CW*, II: 340.

²⁵ In 1852, David Davis referred to this "astonishing" flux of people moving to, from, and through the state. Davis to "dear sir" from Danville, Ill., Oct. 17, 1852, David Davis Letters and Papers, ALPL; *CW*, II: 111–12.

slave state might technically offer to its white inhabitants the prospect of less toil, it remained exceedingly difficult for any poor white man to rise to the status of slaveholder. Perhaps in addition to the sentiments of southern-born migrants, Lincoln had heard of those who, like J. H. Riggin, had attempted a living in the South only to return to “Suckerdome” with a new appreciation of “the advantages all have in the North over the South.” The non-slaveholder gained nothing, and lost greater opportunity, by removing to a slave state. “If you intend to go to work,” Lincoln assured his stepbrother, “there is no better place than right where you are,” and “if you do not intend to go to work, you cannot get along anywhere.” After reprimanding Johnston for his apparent unwillingness to work at a better life for himself, Lincoln explained that he wrote such harsh words “in order, if possible, to get you to face the truth—which truth is, you are destitute because you have idled away all your time. Your thousand pretences for not getting along better, are all non-sense—they deceive no body but yourself. Go to work is the only cure for your case.”²⁶

The ghost of his family’s own migration continued to follow Lincoln through these years. On April 1, 1854, he replied to a letter written to him from Jesse Lincoln, apparently a second cousin of his, residing in Tennessee. Acknowledging to Jesse Lincoln that his family’s genealogy appeared to match all Lincoln knew of his family, Abraham Lincoln further explained that while serving in Congress, he had corresponded with another relative, David Lincoln, currently living in Virginia. Throughout most of the letter, Lincoln retraced his family’s migration story, describing the movement of the Lincolns into territories both free and slave. He also mentioned that he had formed

²⁶ J. H. Riggin to A. K. Riggin, Dec. 25, 1855, Riggin Family Papers, ALPL; *CW*, II: 111–12. Concerned that Johnston’s irresponsibility and lack of motivation might prove detrimental to his son, Abram Johnston, Lincoln accepted Abram into his home for a few months so that he could attend school. *CW*, II: 112.

acquaintances with two prominent Tennesseans—Colonel Crozier and Andrew Johnson—while in Washington, D.C., each of whom had spoken of additional possible relatives bearing the last name, “Lincoln.”²⁷

Meanwhile, the vast migration of southerners to Illinois, although it had dwindled from its previous strength, continued. Drove of southerners simply seeking greater opportunity for themselves still arrived, seeking free soil, but others, too—those who opposed slavery for moral reasons—continued to give up their antislavery efforts in the South and move northwestward. For years, religious leaders from across the United States had relocated to various regions of the country to engage in mission work. Those who had either moved to, or continued to live in, the South, often experienced the difficulty of preaching against slavery in a slave society, but many nonetheless continued to do so up to the early 1850s. Until that time, these men remained confident that the work of antislavery could continue in the South. Working in Kentucky, John G. Fee explained to John Benton as late as 1848 that “I know my being a native of the state had given me great advantages” in allowing him to preach antislavery doctrines. Nevertheless, “I believe the proposed work can be done by a discrete God fearing man from New York.”²⁸ By 1860, however, the status of antislavery ministers in the South had undergone a radical change. Though these ministers had always “found it happier to move to a free state,” as noted by Rev. Harvey Woods of Kentucky, who saw “the best men flying from the South,” the efforts of those who remained behind had become significantly more difficult by the early 1850s. John G. Fee struggled to hold his congregation together in Kentucky during this time. When he sought out five families he

²⁷ *CW*, II: 217–18.

²⁸ John G. Fee to John Benton, Feb. 22, 1848, Edward C. Thurman Collection, FHS.

believed held sympathies similar to those of his church, Fee found that “most of them were anti-slavery but were selling out and going to free states.” Awake “to the wrongs and evils of slavery,” these families “determined that their families should not be subjected to the incident Evils.”²⁹

Whereas the realization that “advantages for them and their children in a slave state are few” had always stirred antislavery southerners to move, by the 1850s “persecution” also “visit[ed] heavy upon them and their families.” In North Carolina, Rev. Daniel Wilson experienced this firsthand. In his AMA correspondence throughout the 1850s, he explained “the exciting circumstances with which we are surrounded in this Southern field of labor.” After witnessing the persecution of two fellow ministers by a proslavery mob, Wilson understood he must carry on his efforts “in a private way,” that would not garner the attention of proslavery southerners.³⁰ In 1855 he expressed a firm resolution that “there is so much prejudice” against northerners that none should be sent to the South to assist in antislavery efforts, no matter how badly they were needed. One of the men who had helped expel other antislavery preachers from the state told a member of Wilson’s congregation “that we are determined that no Northern abolitionist shall come here and preach that doctrine, but that they had no objection [to] those preachers who are Bred and Born here.” Like Fee, however, Whipple struggled to maintain a presence when “a great portion of the more wealthy of our friends have gone from this country to seek a more favored clime,” and members constantly fled from the

²⁹ *Extracts from the Minutes of the Transylvania Presbytery, 1786-1836*, 90n 33, Box 11, Folder 8, Church History Documents Collection, UC; John G. Fee to the Youths Missionary Association, Oct. 21, 1850, Kentucky, American Missionary Association (AMA) Manuscripts (Microfilm), Amistad Research Center, (hereafter abbreviated ARC).

³⁰ John G. Fee, Aug. 9, 1850, Kentucky, AMA Manuscripts (microfilm); Daniel Wilson to George Whipple, June 22, 1852, Wilson to Whipple, July 22, 1852, North Carolina, AMA Manuscripts (microfilm), ARC.

South. Those who stayed, he explained, were ostracized by the rest of society, and “such is the influence of the Slave Power” that all antislavery candidates were repressed and not granted printed tickets for people to vote.³¹

Whipple’s correspondence offers a window into the changing South, which Lincoln had little contact with throughout the 1850s. Though familiar with the impact of southern non-slaveholders on the Northwest, he was not aware of the potentially “negative effect of intentional antislavery migration” on the South. As historian Philip Schwarz argues, “[i]f those who migrated had stayed in Virginia, they might have worked against human bondage” and perhaps convinced a section of the South to embrace gradual emancipation.³² Though Lincoln makes no explicit reference to the continuing migration of southerners in the 1850s, there is substantial evidence that he read particular literature about the South throughout the decade.³³ These tracts informed him that the region had moved even further from its early commitment to gradual emancipation but continued to contain a substantive body of white nonslaveholders who resisted the efforts of a proslavery slaveholding aristocracy. Besides southern newspaper articles, Lincoln indicated to Judge George Robertson of Lexington, Kentucky, that he had also read part of Robertson’s *Scrap Book on Law and Politics, Men and Times*, which offered Lincoln a Kentuckian’s perspective on the subject of slavery. Specifically, Lincoln commented on a

³¹ Wilson to Whipple, Feb. 19, 1855, March 20, 1853, May 1, 1853, Nov. 30, 1853, North Carolina, AMA Manuscripts (microfilm), ARC; David Brown, “Hinton Rowan Helper: The Logical Outcome of the Non-Slaveholders’ Philosophy?” *The Historical Journal* 46 (March 2003): 51. North Carolina-born migrant to Indiana Daniel Worth succeeded Wilson in 1857, and noted the same problem that “all antislavery men who could afford it—about half his church members—had fled to ‘more congenial climes.’” Clifton H. Johnson, “Abolitionist Missionary Activities in North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 40 (July 1963): 307.

³² Schwarz, *Migrants Against Slavery*, 15. Gordon E. Finnie makes this argument in his dissertation, “The Antislavery Movement in the South, 1787–1836: Its Rise and Decline and Its Contribution to Abolitionism in the West” (PhD diss., Duke University, 1962).

³³ Some of these are listed in Robert Bray, “What Abraham Lincoln Read: An Evaluative and Annotated List,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 28 (Summer 2007): 28–81.

speech the elder Robertson had given in Congress during the Missouri crisis. On February 18, 1819, he had argued in favor of admitting Arkansas to the Union and described his own opinion that although the Constitution “does not *guarantee* to the people of the territories the right to establish slavery,” leaving it to Congress to decide the matter, the best policy would nevertheless be to simply allow each territory to decide the matter for itself. Robertson believed this stance matched the Founders’ position, and he pleaded with his fellow colleagues to “do as Washington, and Franklin, and Jefferson did, and would certainly do again, were they now here.” Yet his opinions were also heavily based on his sense in 1819 that “Slavery is Geographical” would never survive in northern latitudes.³⁴

Lincoln’s 1855 response to Robertson’s reprinted 1819 speech mingled praise with careful remonstrance. Pleased that Robertson revealed himself as “not a friend of slavery in the abstract,” Lincoln pointed favorably to the former congressman’s reference to “the peaceful extinction of slavery” at some point in the country’s future. This opinion, of course, Lincoln was glad to see expressed by a Kentuckian. However, Lincoln also firmly urged that since Robertson had given his speech in 1819, “we have had thirty years of experience; and this experience has demonstrated, I think, that there is not peaceful extinction of slavery in prospect for us.” Popular sovereignty had proven itself beneficial not to the advocates of antislavery but to those who sought the spread of the destructive institution. “The signal failure of Henry Clay, and other good and great men, in 1849, to effect any thing in favor of gradual emancipation in Kentucky, together with a thousand other signs” indicated that antislavery sentiment had waned under the lack of a

³⁴ *CW*, II: 317–18; George Robertson, *Scrap Book on Law and Politics, Men and Times* (Lexington, Ky.: A. W. Elder, 1855), 23–24, 27.

clear and direct policy to prevent the further spread of slavery. Clearly disturbed by this sociopolitical development, Lincoln admitted that the “problem is to[o] mighty for me.”³⁵

North Carolinian Benjamin S. Hedrick’s pamphlet, which asked, “Are North Carolinians Freemen?” offered Lincoln a more comprehensive assessment of southern society that largely corroborated the views he had garnered up to 1856. Hedrick’s pamphlet contained, first, a reprinted section of the North Carolina *Standard* from September 1856 that demanded all Fremont supporters in southern “schools and seminaries of learning” be fired from their positions. The issue referenced Hedrick, arguing that he should be removed from his position as college professor at the State University. “Upon what ground can a Southern instructor,” the paper asked, “selected to impart healthy instruction to the *sons of Southern slave owners*, and indebted for his situation to a Southern State, *excuse* his support of Fremont?” Hedrick responded directly to these accusations by writing the editors of the *Standard* in explanation of his support for presidential nominee John C. Fremont. Fremont, he explained, “was born and educated at the South,” then “lived at the North and the West,” and thus was a truly national man. Furthermore, he was “on the right side of the great question which now disturbs the public peace. Opposition to slavery extension,” Hedrick insisted, “is neither a Northern nor a sectional *ism*,” but “originated with the great Southern statesmen of the Revolution.” The tradition of limiting slavery’s extension extended from the Founders of 1776 to the Great Compromiser. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, James Madison, and John Randolph “were all opposed to slavery in the abstract,” and sealed antislavery as national policy with their passage of the Ordinance of 1787. The nation then carried their tradition forward under the leadership of Daniel Webster and

³⁵ *CW*, II: 317–18; Robertson, *Scrap Book*, 24.

Henry Clay, who had publicly declared: “I never can, and never will vote, and no earthly power ever will make me vote to spread slavery over territory where it does not exist.”³⁶

Hedrick then joined to these intellectual statements of leading Americans his own experiences with “the majority of the people among whom I was born and educated.” These arguments recalled the same points that had been voiced by Virginians in 1831, when legislators debated the merits of a slave system that seemed to expel white laborers from its midst.³⁷ Hedrick explained: “Of my neighbors, friends, and kindred, nearly one-half have left the State since I was old enough to remember. Many is the time I have stood by the loaded emigrant wagon, and given the parting hand to those whose face I was never to look upon again.” These families “were going to seek homes in the free West,” he asserted, “knowing, as they did, that free and slave labor could not both exist and prosper in the same community.” To further support these declarations, Hedrick offered the statistics of the 1850 census, which had recorded “fifty-eight thousand native North Carolinians living in the free States of the West. Thirty-three thousand in Indiana alone. There were, at the same time, one hundred and eighty thousand Virginians living in the free States. Now, if these people were so much in love with the ‘institution,’ why

³⁶ At the conclusion of Benjamin S. Hedrick’s pamphlet was appended an extract from Judge Gaston, a North Carolinian who had spoken at the University of North Carolina on the evils of slavery years before. This excerpt proved that opposition to slavery had once been acceptable to southern society, before “the pro-slavery fanatics” had gained control. Hedrick, “Are North Carolinians Freeman?” LC.

³⁷ The 1831–1832 session of the Virginia state legislature featured a series of arguments by slaveholders that slavery’s social evils were proving detrimental to the state’s prosperity. Concerns that slavery drove white nonslaveholders from Virginia prompted legislators to consider a plan for gradual emancipation. Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 368–69; Schwarz, *Migrants Against Slavery*, 12–15; Fischer and Kelly, *Bound Away*, 210; Avery Odell Craven, “Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860,” *University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences* 13 (March 1925): 122. Virginian Henry Ruffner had echoed these sentiments in 1847, when he held up the continued mass migration of white nonslaveholders from Virginia as proof “that slavery drives free laborers—farmers, mechanics, and all, and some of the best of them too—out of the country, and fills their places with negroes.” Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 88; Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 11–13; Link, *Roots of Secession*, 11.

did they not remain where they could enjoy its blessings?” Hedrick used these statistics against southerners who argued that slavery required more territory, pointing out that “here in North Carolina,” as in Virginia, “we need more men, rather than more land.” Since the northeastern slave states had sold much of their slave population further Southwest and white nonslaveholders had fled from slavery, he argued, states like North Carolina and Virginia now needed more men—not more land. Yet white nonslaveholders would not willingly relocate to a place “which degrades white labor.”³⁸

Hedrick’s pamphlet, though containing assertions peculiar to his own experiences as a North Carolinian academic, echoed the arguments Lincoln had begun to make by 1854 and would refine in his later speeches and debates. This southerner revealed to the Kentucky-born northwesterner exactly what he had suspected and confirmed for him what he had always believed—that the self-interest of southern nonslaveholders was directly opposed to slavery and the class of slaveholders it created. Hedrick’s exposition of the Founders’ antislavery policy originating in the Northwest Ordinance, combined with his witnessing of vast migrations to the Northwest, confirmed that the nonslaveholding southerner understood the implications of the Ordinance and made a clear and firm decision to move to free soil rather than slave.³⁹ Although Lincoln had heard these arguments before, during his term in Congress, Hedrick more effectively

³⁸ Ibid., LC; *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, Senate, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 126. Proslavery southerners, meanwhile, attempted to utilize statistics for their own benefit. James D. B. De Bow, who became a leading secessionist, was appointed Director of the U.S. Census Bureau in 1853 after years of founding and editing his *Commercial Review of the South and West*. Eric H. Walther, *The Fire-Eaters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 207–09; Otis Clark Skipper, *J. D. B. De Bow: Magaziner of the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), 72.

³⁹ Hedrick also stated that from “my knowledge of the people of North Carolina, I believe that the majority of them will go to Kansas during the next five years, would prefer that it should be a free State.” Nevertheless, since “it is almost impossible to get rid of the system when once introduced,” no guarantee protected these nonslaveholders from the designs of slaveholding southerners who wished to accumulate more wealth. Ibid., LC.

presented the benefits of free labor over slave and depicted the detrimental effects of slavery than any northerner could. His forced removal from the university and from the South only further showed that the slaveholding aristocracy had taken control of the region, snuffing out antislavery sentiments and expelling those who proclaimed them.⁴⁰

Hinton Helper's *The Impending Crisis of the South*, which sent shock waves reverberating across the Union after its publication in 1857, presented Lincoln with a politicized, comprehensive indictment of the slave system by a white nonslaveholder. Rather than emphasizing the lofty antislavery statements of long-dead Founding Fathers and offering personal migration stories to appeal to "the better angels of our nature," Helper lambasted an oligarchical slave power for crippling their fellow white nonslaveholders and stripping them of their rights and power. Dedicating the book, in part, to the "Non-Slaveholding Whites of the South," he urged them to "cast aside the great obstacle that impedes their progress, and bring into action a new policy which will lead them from poverty and ignorance to wealth and intellectual greatness." As David Brown presciently notes, "Historians remain divided over the question of whether non-slaveholders were fundamentally exploited by a slave-holding elite, as Helper argued, or whether slavery actually served their interests in certain ways." Lincoln, however, had little doubt that nonslaveholders' freedoms and progress withered in the face of an overbearing slaveholding elite. Born in Kentucky to Virginian parents who moved their family to the free soil of the Northwest, Lincoln was raised to consider slavery a moral and social evil. Over the course of his life up to 1860, his interactions with southerners

⁴⁰ Hedrick was voted out of the school by the rest of the faculty and the board of trustees, then eventually forced out of his home state. Michael Thomas Smith, *A Traitor and a Scoundrel: Benjamin Hedrick and the Cost of Dissent* (University of Delaware Press, 2003), 9; David Brown, "Attacking Slavery from Within: The Making of 'The Impending Crisis of the South,'" *Journal of Southern History* 70 (August 2004): 565.

were almost exclusively with either those who had chosen to leave the South for free soil, or slaveholders who enjoyed not only economic power but political power in Congress as well. Thus, to Lincoln, Helper's arguments simply confirmed what he had long believed he well knew: that the natural interests of the white non-slaveholding southerner were opposed to the proslavery interests of the white southern slaveholder.⁴¹

Although Helper's tract, with its unapologetic disregard for the moral aspects of the slavery question, provided a stunningly different argument, in style and tone, from Hedrick's statements and those of many antislavery northerners, it nonetheless became a significant weapon wielded by Republicans for the election of 1860.⁴² Antislavery and abolitionist leaders in both the North and South worked to give Helper's book as wide a distribution as possible, and many leading Republicans signed and/or assisted in issuing the *Compendium to the Impending Crisis*, a condensed edition of Helper's work intended to garner the support for the Republican Party.⁴³ Although Lincoln never publicly endorsed the book, neither did he denounce it; and in his Cooper Union address, he did explicitly reference it.⁴⁴ Thus, once he began articulating statements about slavery that revealed his particular perception of the South in 1854, Lincoln's generalizations about the South and his conception of southern slave society actually changed very little. The one crucial development he foresaw was the reversal of the nation's antislavery tradition, spurred by a slaveholding minority that had become more politically and economically powerful over time. Even up through 1860, however, Lincoln believed this development

⁴¹ Hinton Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Bros., 1857), 17; David Brown, "Hinton Rowan Helper," 41.

⁴² Both Hedrick and Helper cited the 1850 census as evidence that southerners fled from the slave states of Virginia and North Carolina for the free territory of the West. Brown, "Attacking Slavery from Within," 576 n84 and n85.

⁴³ Brown, "Hinton Rowan Helper," 53; J. J. Cardoso, "Lincoln, Abolitionism, and Patronage: The Case of Hinton Rowan Helper," *Journal of Negro History* 53 (April 1968): 148.

⁴⁴ Cardoso, "Lincoln, Abolitionism, and Patronage," 148.

would not occur in a few years but rather over decades, in a slow dissipation of moral conviction incurred by an adoption of popular sovereignty as the official national policy on the slavery issue.

In a long, frank letter to friend Joshua F. Speed in August 24, 1855, Lincoln provided a general summary of his conception of the South, his animosity toward Douglas's popular sovereignty, and his plan for the Union's future course on the slavery issue. Lincoln understood, first and foremost, that Speed, like many southerners, admitted "the abstract wrong" of slavery. He was also aware that his deeper sense of slavery's immorality separated him from the sentiments of many Americans, both North and South. "[E]very time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border," he explained, he was reminded of the shackled slaves he had once seen on a trip to Kentucky with Speed in 1841. The scene devastated him each time he thought of it, and he admonished Speed that "the great body of the Northern people" were forced to "crucify their feelings" for the sake of Union. Although Speed and other antislavery southerners feared that fusionists or Republicans would attempt to steal away the rights of slaveholders, Lincoln assured him that to the contrary, they would protect those rights and even uphold the Fugitive Slave Act. While "I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes, and unrewarded toils," he explained, "I also acknowledge your rights and my obligations, under the constitution, in regard to your slaves." Displaying for Speed how important he believed the bonds between North and South to be, Lincoln further asserted that the sections were not so different. Even in the South, he pointed out, "slave-breeders and slave traders" were looked down upon as "a small, odious and detested class." He ruefully noted that despite their denigrated position, "in

politics they dictate the course of all of you, and are as completely your masters as you are the masters of your own negroes.”⁴⁵

The admonishing tone Lincoln adopted in his letter to longtime Kentucky friend Joshua Speed would be the one Lincoln continued to use as he gave speeches in Illinois from 1854 to 1860. Lincoln continued to evoke his belief that a relatively small but assertive proslavery group of slaveholders sought to either make slavery synonymous with Union or otherwise force a division of the Union. For this contingent, Lincoln displayed nothing less than total abhorrence. Yet for the rest of the South—for the vast majority of slaveholders and non-slaveholders whom he believed did not uphold the spread of slavery over the perpetuation of the Union—Lincoln reserved the same chiding but coaxing tone that he had imparted to Speed. His expressions mixed confident self-assurance that he understood the position and sentiments of most white southerners with a cautious hope that these same southerners would listen to him and come to understand that he would protect the South, not seek to destroy it. Further evidence of Lincoln’s views of the South up to 1860 can be gleaned from the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, a series of seven speaking engagements in which Lincoln and Stephen Douglas sparred for the votes of their fellow Illinoisans for the U.S. Senate. Though centered in Illinois, these debates in the summer and fall of 1858 received nationwide attention and centered on slavery issues that resonated with Americans across the entire Union.⁴⁶

Lincoln frequently repeated his firm belief “that the Southern slaveholders were neither better, nor worse than we of the North, and that we of the North were no better

⁴⁵ *CW*, II: 320–23.

⁴⁶ Stephen Douglas explained the origination and planning of the debate series between him and Lincoln during the seventh and final debate. Robert W. Johannsen, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (New York and other cities: Oxford University Press, 2008), 286–87.

than they. If we were situated as they are, we should act and feel as they do; and if they were situated as we are, they should act and feel as we do; and we never ought to lose sight of this fact in discussing the subject.”⁴⁷ Lincoln clarified this further at Peoria in 1854, explaining that “I have no prejudice against the Southern people,” and that if “slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up.” In his first scheduled debate with Stephen Douglas at Ottawa on August 21, 1858, Lincoln repeated these statements.⁴⁸ He also complicated the otherwise clear distinction between North and South he and other politicians frequently resorted to, noting that “there are individuals, on both sides, who would not hold slaves under any circumstances; and others who would gladly introduce slavery anew, if it were out of existence.” At Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1856, Lincoln placed the blame for slavery on “the mother Government of Great Britain,” explaining that Americans, North and South, “have ever deplored it. Our forefathers did.”⁴⁹

Resurrecting his knowledge of white migrations, Lincoln asserted: “We know that southern men do free their slaves, go north, and become tip-top abolitionists; while some northern ones go south, and become most cruel slave-masters.” Most likely, he was aware of several specific cases in which southern slaveholders freed their slaves, including Virginian Edward Coles’s (in)famous removal to Illinois, and of his ceremonious freeing of his own slaves as they sailed down the Ohio River.⁵⁰ Hailing from a well-connected Virginia family, Coles had served as governor of Illinois and played a crucial role in the

⁴⁷ *CW*, II: 230–31.

⁴⁸ *CW*, II: 255; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 51.

⁴⁹ *CW*, II: 361.

⁵⁰ It is also probable that Lincoln knew of Judge Theophilus Dickey, a friend of David Davis’s who had freed the slaves he inherited in Kentucky and moved to Illinois. Excerpt from Isabel Wallace, *The Life and Letters of General W. H. L. Wallace*, David Davis Letters and Papers, ALPL.

Illinois debates over slavery in 1824. In 1856 he gave an address entitled *History of the Ordinance of 1787* to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania that was printed and released that same year as a pamphlet.⁵¹ Whether or not Lincoln read this particular tract, it is likely that he knew Coles's general opinion that the Ordinance had exhibited Thomas Jefferson's desire to rid the country of slavery, received the sanction of North and South, and preserved the Northwest as prosperous free territory. Coles asserted the Ordinance "was the offspring of the greatest statesman of our country; and no one can fail to see in it the kindred political features of its elder brother, the Declaration of American Independence." He explained that in return for incorporating a fugitive slave law into the Constitution to protect slaveholders, the South passed the antislavery provision with "extraordinary unanimity." Looking back upon the events of the past few years, Coles lamented that "men professing to be of the Jefferson school of politics" had turned away from the principles of the Ordinance of 1787 and precipitated "contention, riots, and threats, if not the awful realities of civil war."⁵²

The views Lincoln expressed regarding the Northwest Ordinance certainly mirrored those of Edward Coles. From 1856 to 1860, Lincoln continued presenting the Ordinance as the clearest exhibition of the Founding Fathers' views on the extension of slavery.⁵³ Like Coles, he also continued to pledge his full support for a constitutional fugitive slave law because the North had made a promise with the South in 1787 that it

⁵¹ Coles had served as private secretary to President James Madison while living in Virginia then as Governor of Illinois from December 1822 to December 1826, after freeing his slaves on the way to his new home in Illinois in 1819. The support he gathered from southern-born migrants helped him to defeat those who desired a state convention in 1824. Krenkel, ed., *Richard Yates*, 98 n1; Kurt E. Leichtle and Bruce G. Carveth, *Crusade Against Slavery: Edward Coles, Pioneer of Freedom* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 101, 69–70; David Ress, *Governor Edward Coles and the Vote to Forbid Slavery in Illinois, 1823–1824* (Jefferson, NC.: McFarland and Co., 2006), 151.

⁵² *CW*, II: 255; Edward Coles, *History of the Ordinance of 1787* (Philadelphia: T.K. and P.G. Collins, 1856), 27–28, 32.

⁵³ *CW*, II: 346–47, 378–80; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 55, 132, 199–200, 277–78

intended to keep.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Lincoln emphasized the racial arguments that Hinton Helper and Illinoisans had so frequently expressed, declaring himself “in favor of our new Territories being in such a condition that white men may find a home—may find some spot where they can better their condition—where they can settle upon new soil and better their condition in life.”⁵⁵

Lincoln believed the “great majority, south as well as north, have human sympathies, of which they can no more divest themselves than they can of their sensibility to physical pain. These sympathies in the bosoms of the southern people, manifest in many ways, their sense of the wrong of slavery, and their consciousness that, after all, there is humanity in the negro.” This vast majority, Lincoln asserted, did not seek to unconditionally extend slavery and disrupt the peace of the Union, for “of all those who come into the world, only a small percentage are natural tyrants. That percentage is no larger in the slave States than in the free.” Lincoln placed himself in common with this perceived majority when he admitted that “[i]f all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution [of slavery.]” Playing upon his belief that colonization was a viable scheme that attracted multitudes in both sections of the Union, he claimed that his “first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia.” Since this was a nearly impossible feat, he asked: “What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mind would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.” With this statement, Lincoln clearly drew upon the deep aversion to African Americans he had so often seen exhibited by southern migrants in

⁵⁴ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 76–77, 321.

⁵⁵ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 316. Lincoln expressed similar sentiments at Kalamazoo, Michigan, *CW*, II: 363.

Illinois, assuming this sentiment prevailed among southerners as well as northwesterners. In a further appeal to whites in both areas, Lincoln explicated that he believed “systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted; but for their tardiness in this, I will not undertake to judge our brethren of the South”⁵⁶

He perceived that white southerners generally hated blacks, as did many northwesterners, and believed many of them looked upon the institution of slavery with feelings ranging from dislike to extreme animosity. In his seventh debate with Douglas, Lincoln asked: “How many Democrats are there about here who have left slave States and come into the free State of Illinois to get rid of the institution of slavery?” When someone from the audience yelled “A thousand and one,” Lincoln replied: “I reckon there are a thousand and one. I will ask you, if the policy [of popular sovereignty] you are now advocating had prevailed when this country was in a Territorial condition, where would you have gone to get rid of it?” Lincoln’s response echoed his long-held sense that white southerner nonslaveholders sought free territory. His assumption that southern whites continued an anti-slave system attitude similar to their northwestern brethren stemmed partly from his recognition that the “tyrants” of southern society, slave traders, seemed so universally despised in the South. Speaking especially to white slaveholders, he depicted the “SLAVE-DEALER” as a despicable person who “watches your necessities, and crawls up to buy your slave, at a speculating price. If you cannot help it, you sell to him; but if you can help it, you drive him from your door. You despise him utterly.” An outcast banished to the edges of society, the slave trader suffered from a

⁵⁶ *CW*, II: 264, 255–56.

“ban of non-intercourse,” and he and his family never gained acceptance by their neighbors.⁵⁷

Although Lincoln dramatically altered his political future by committing himself to the Republican Party and its moderated platform in 1856, his conception of the South changed little after his Peoria address in 1854, and the sentiments he evoked in the Lincoln-Douglas debates largely reflected the views of the South he had maintained since 1854.⁵⁸ Though many scholars contextualize Lincoln and Douglas’s statements about the Northwest Ordinance within the debates themselves, and within the politics of the 1850s, historians have largely missed the greater significance of the Northwest Ordinance to Lincoln—from its direct impact on his family’s migration, to the consequent migration of so many southerners with whom Lincoln became acquainted, to the Ordinance’s frequent resurrections in congressional debates of the 30th Congress and beyond.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 316; *CW*, II: 264.

⁵⁸ Lincoln proceeded to quote his Peoria address, referencing his preferred method of colonization as the most ideal in dealing with slavery. Assuring that he would “not undertake to judge our brethren of the South,” he sought to display how much he sympathized with southerners who constantly dealt with the problem of slavery in their midst. Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 52.

⁵⁹ Historians of the Lincoln-Douglas debates often explain the importance Lincoln’s invocation of the Northwest Ordinance had for Illinoisans, referencing the continuation of slavery in Illinois through statehood in 1818, and the convention debates of the 1820s, then neglect its significance to Lincoln himself. David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 4, 27, 146–49; Saul Sigelschiffer, *The American Conscience: The Drama of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Horizon Press, 1973), 400. Daniel Farber, *Lincoln’s Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 9, describes the Northwest Ordinance’s significance to Americans in a national context, but does not connect it to Lincoln’s experience. Similarly, Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 254, 230, which asserts that Lincoln’s experiences in the Northwest influenced his view of the South and the secession crisis, nevertheless does not connect this to Lincoln’s own commitment to, and understanding of, the Northwest Ordinance. Lewis E. Lehrman draws out Lincoln’s references to the Northwest Ordinance in his Peoria address as critical to his approach to the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration, and the antislavery tradition created by the Founding Fathers. Despite this emphasis, he depicts the history of the Northwest Ordinance in Illinois as a backstory that is separated from Lincoln, rather than an influence with which he was intimately connected. Lehrman, *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point, Getting Right with the Declaration of Independence* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 2008), 111–14, 71. George Anastaplo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 39–49, 124–34, breaks down the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 in great detail, explaining its constitutional significance in terms of law and politics; then spends ten pages on the significance of Lincoln’s political upbringing in southern/central Illinois; but it does not connect the migrations produced by the Northwest Ordinance to Lincoln’s experiences in Illinois.

The arguments Lincoln made resembling the “slave power” assertions of other northern colleagues had deep roots in his northwestern experiences. Lincoln had long believed that beside the malignant slave dealer, there existed a minority of proslavery whites like John C. Calhoun who sought to extend the institution and its evils even if their actions threatened the Union, and that these men also qualified as “tyrants” seeking to establish their control over the white nonslaveholder and, ultimately, the Union. Although he knew such men had always existed in the South, by 1858 he perceived a significant new development in national politics that sincerely bothered him. Lincoln had likely been long aware of the fact that by the 3/5 Compromise, the South held a voting power disproportionate to its number of white citizens. As he characterized the results of this arrangement in 1854: “The citizens of Slave States have a political power in the general government beyond their single votes and this violates the equality between American Citizens.” Despite resurrecting this argument, so often launched as a charge against the South by antislavery northerners who feared a growing “slave power,” Lincoln did not seek to alter the arrangement itself. “It was ‘in the bond’ and he would live faithfully by it,” in allegiance to the Constitution and all its provisions.⁶⁰ From 1854 to 1860, although Lincoln perceived that the South had begun to move away from its former commitment to eventually ending slavery, he nevertheless did not see the greatest fundamental change—and, thus, the greatest danger—occurring within the South, but rather within the North. Awakened to Douglas’s attempt to make popular sovereignty, which purposely avoided the question of slavery’s immorality, the Union’s official course in deciding the status of slavery in the territories, Lincoln believed that, for the first time,

⁶⁰ *CW*, II: 246.

the always-present southern proslavery contingent had succeeded in forcing northerners to redefine America's commitment in regard to slavery.

Lincoln certainly feared that the proslavery group had grown larger within the South. Looking back upon the nation's recent history during the seventh debate at Alton, he claimed that until recently, only John C. Calhoun, John Pettit, and a group of southern followers of Calhoun had believed the Declaration of Independence excluded blacks from its assertion that "all men" were created equal. Nevertheless, even in 1858 Lincoln did not believe a majority of Americans—North or South—adhered to that conviction. Rather, he believed a proslavery aristocracy had slowly strangled out the voices of white slaveholders and nonslaveholders opposed to slavery and increased its political and social power to the point of coercing northern Democrats into a new arrangement, whereby Douglas "ventured to assail [the Declaration] in the sneaking way of pretending to believe it and then asserting it did not include the negro." By 1858, after hearing about southerners like Benjamin S. Hedrick, who was persecuted for simply expressing his antislavery principles, Lincoln recognized that severe limits had been placed on free speech in the South, and "in the Southern portion of the Union the people did not let the Republicans proclaim their doctrine amongst them."⁶¹ This restriction appeared to him to be the symptom of an elite slaveholding aristocracy gaining greater control of the region and suppressing the natural interests of white nonslaveholders, rather than evidence that a majority of southern society had begun to embrace unconditional proslavery doctrines. The reason why the South felt more emboldened in the past few years, Lincoln believed, was because Stephen Douglas, James Buchanan, and other northern Democrats had delivered the northern Democracy to them. Lincoln's former fears that the South would

⁶¹ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 304–05; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 222.

“claim the constitutional right to take to and hold slaves in the free states” had been partially realized by the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857.⁶² Although he saw Buchanan as one of the conspirators involved in bringing about that decision, Lincoln’s asserted in the debates “that there was a *tendency*, if not a conspiracy among those who have engineered this slavery question for the last four or five years, to make slavery perpetual and universal in this nation.” At the head of this vast conspiracy stood Douglas, whose popular sovereignty platform made slavery palatable to a section of white nonslaveholders, North and South, whose anti-slave system ethos gave way to sympathies with white slaveholding family and friends and thus paved the way for a future Union replete with slavery.⁶³

Lincoln believed Douglas had wielded his national influence, much of which had been won from his successful efforts to pass the Compromise of 1850, to convince Democrats they needed to support his brand of popular sovereignty for the sake of the Union. Lincoln pointed to two instances of Democratic opposition to the principles of popular sovereignty, one occurring in 1850 and the other in 1854. During the 1858 debates with Douglas, Lincoln cited the assembly of an 1850 Congressional Convention in Joliet, Illinois, in which the largely Democratic members of the convention adopted a resolution declaring themselves “uncompromisingly opposed to the extension of slavery” because the principles of non-extension “were recognized by the Ordinance of 1787, which received the sanction of Thomas Jefferson, who is acknowledged by all to be the great oracle and expounder of our faith.” In his August 1855 letter to Speed, meanwhile, Lincoln had described the course of the Illinois legislature in the winter of 1854. He

⁶² In the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* case, the Supreme Court decided that masters could take their slaves to territories where slavery had been prohibited. Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 201–02.

⁶³ *CW*, II: 272; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 56.

claimed the Democrats had held a caucus in February, in which only a few party members pledged their support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act. But when “Douglas’ orders came on to have resolutions passed approving the bill,” the Democrats suddenly endorsed it and passed it by a great majority. Thus it was Douglas who, by making the Kansas-Nebraska Act “a democratic party necessity,” convinced the multitudes to embrace a position on the slavery issue that contradicted the Founders. In his own notes on “Sectionalism” Lincoln repeated this charge. “When the repeal of the Missouri compromise was first proposed,” he remembered, “at the North there was literally [sic] ‘nobody’ in favor of it. In February 1854 our Legislature met in call, or extra, session. From them Douglas sought an indorsement [sic] of his then pending measure of Repeal.” The Democrats held a caucus and ultimately decided to support Douglas and his bill, but those Democrats who bolted, Lincoln explained, later claimed “that the caucus fairly confessed that the Repeal was wrong.”⁶⁴

In his retelling of recent events, Lincoln perceived a sinister design to shift public sentiment to either indifference or outright support of slavery. Douglas’s “much vaunted doctrine of self-government for the territories,” Lincoln insisted, “was a mere deceitful pretense for the benefit of slavery.” In his last debate at Alton, he further asserted that “Judge Douglas has been the most prominent instrument in changing the position of the institution of slavery which the fathers of the Government expected to come to an end,” and “placing it where he [Douglas] openly confesses he has no desire there shall ever be an end of it.” Lincoln continued to believe much of Douglas’s support came from white nonslaveholders of both sections of the Union who felt they had to lay their anti-slave system sentiments aside in order to pacify the South and preserve the Union. During the

⁶⁴ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 140; *CW*, II: 320–33, 349.

sixth debate at Quincy, Lincoln alluded to his fellow Illinoisans' disbelief that the Democratic Party's "central idea" rested on the conviction "that slavery is not wrong." Lincoln believed he had to convince swaths of Democrats who personally opposed slavery that their allegiance to the Democratic Party would actually destroy, rather than save, the Union. He insisted these Douglas supporters simply did not realize the outcome of their own political doctrine, especially after the *Dred Scott* decision upheld the right of any slaveowner to bring his slaves into a territory.⁶⁵

Lincoln pointed to the repercussions of Douglas's doctrine across the Union, emphasizing not only the complete reversal of the Founders' antislavery tradition, begun with the 1787 Ordinance and continued onward by Henry Clay, but also the gulf that now separated North from South. Although Douglas had intended his policy to unite northerners and southerners, Lincoln thought it had the exact opposite effect. In a speech at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1856, he noted that southern newspapers now frequently expressed an erroneous view of the free states. Defending the right of slavery to spread, these southerners "insist that their slaves are far better off than Northern freemen," and that "men are always to remain laborers here." Lincoln hinted that these southerners had acquired a mistaken view of the free states from free state men like Douglas, who assured them that living in a slave state was no better or worse than living on free soil. "These men don't understand when they think in this manner of Northern free labor," Lincoln explained, but "[w]hen these reasons can be introduced, tell me not that we have no interest in keeping the Territories free for the settlement of free laborers." Lincoln thus continued to believe that if northern Democrats understood the true nature of popular sovereignty, and if southerners were made aware of the benefits of the free states, they

⁶⁵ *CW*, II: 398; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 320, 255–56.

would turn away from Douglas's demagoguery and many would realize the sincere efforts of the Republican Party to perpetuate the Union and its founding principles.

Lincoln therefore particularly resented Douglas's insistence on launching one accusation after another against Lincoln and the Republican Party, rather than addressing the flaws of his own doctrine.⁶⁶

Douglas, of course, utilized his national clout against Lincoln and his party. Throughout the debates, he cast Lincoln as a secret abolitionist who altered his doctrines to fit the different sections of Illinois and sought a war between the sections that would fulfill his true intentions of ending slavery immediately.⁶⁷ Although there was a semblance of truth behind Douglas's assertions, Lincoln resented what he perceived as gross mischaracterizations of his intentions as well as those of his party. He did his best to counter Douglas's charges and to fully explicate his own position on the slavery issue, seeking to prove that he did not mislead his constituents by proclaiming different doctrines in different sections of the state. In large part, Lincoln's dismay and frustration stemmed from a realization that Douglas presented a convincing argument to whites in the North and South. He knew that men like Elijah P. Lovejoy had often denied accusations of abolitionism, only to turn around and exhibit an unrelenting demand to end slavery with or without the South's consent. He also recognized the alluring nature of Douglas's assurance that popular sovereignty upheld "the great principles upon which our government rests."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *CW*, II: 364.

⁶⁷ Douglas frequently claimed Lincoln and his party as abolitionist: Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 289, 116. He alleged that Lincoln altered his doctrines in different sections of Illinois: *Ibid.*, 195, 265, 212–14, 241. Lastly, he asserted that Lincoln sought a war between the sections: *Ibid.*, 197, 289, 116.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 198, 30. During the First debate at Ottawa, *Ibid.*, 37–38, Douglas argued that the Democratic party promoted the national legacies of Jefferson, Clay, Webster, and Cass.

Most importantly, Lincoln believed that Douglas and his constituents had walked into a trap, ignorantly succumbing to the demands of the South's minority of proslavery expansionists. Although a pang of jealousy may have led him to ponder his own apparent "flat failure" compared to Douglas's success in "the race of ambition," Lincoln truly believed that despite Douglas's popularity, the Little Giant's success was little more than a mirage that would disappear when the South tactfully dropped its support from underneath him and pressed for greater demands. Douglas had simply fallen prey to his own blind desires and reached for "the fluttering prize of the presidency...held up, on Southern terms, to the greedy eyes of Northern ambition." Perhaps Lincoln reflected on his own Lyceum address, given twenty years previous, and viewed Douglas as that man who "thirsts and burns for distinction" and will attain it "whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen." Regardless of his exact view of Douglas, Lincoln revealed in his debates, speeches, and in his correspondence that he believed he understood the South better than Douglas. Though the Vermont-born Illinoisan owned slaves, married a southerner, and flirted with proslavery doctrines, Lincoln believed his own experiences placed him in a better position to truly understand the South and its people. He thought Douglas idealistic in his confidence that popular sovereignty would permanently resolve the slavery question; Lincoln was confident that his conception of southerners remained more accurate than Douglas's.⁶⁹

Lincoln displayed this conviction in his charges against, and responses to, Douglas. Douglas frequently claimed not only to represent southern interests better than Lincoln but to know southern people better than he did. The very pool of migrants to which Lincoln belonged, Douglas asserted, were now foreign to this former Kentuckian.

⁶⁹ *CW*, II: 382–83, 352; I: 114.

With the Republican platform, he asserted, Lincoln “cannot cross over the Ohio into Kentucky. Lincoln himself cannot visit the land of his fathers, the scenes of his childhood, the graves of his ancestors, and carry his Abolition principles, as he declared them at Chicago, with him.” Rather than protect the South, Douglas warned white southerners and their northwestern kin, Lincoln would “hem them in until the negroes will be so plenty that they cannot live on the soil.”⁷⁰ He further attempted to tear down Lincoln’s association with southerners by ridiculing his invocation of his southern background. “Mr. Lincoln attempts to cover up and get over his Abolitionism by telling you that he was raised a little east of you, beyond the Wabash in Indiana, and he thinks that makes a mighty sound and good man of him on all these questions.” Douglas waved off Lincoln’s southern roots and declared that a man’s geography did not determine his political principles. “The worse Abolitionists I have ever known in Illinois,” he explained, “have been men who have sold their slaves in Alabama and Kentucky, and have come here and turned Abolitionists while spending the money got for the negroes they sold.” He did not think that “an Abolitionist from Indiana or Kentucky ought to have any more credit because he was born and raised among slaveholders.”⁷¹

Lincoln, however, did believe that he had gained crucial insights into southern society that Douglas had never been privy to, and Lincoln did invoke his southern background to demonstrate that his own doctrines of antislavery and free labor stemmed, in part, from what he had experienced, seen, and heard of slavery as a southern-born northwesterner. Thus, when Douglas gleefully pledged to “trot” Lincoln down to Egypt in expectation that he would soften his “abolitionist” doctrines for the southern-born

⁷⁰ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 265–66.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 157–58.

migrants, Lincoln wondered aloud: “Did the Judge talk of trotting me down to Egypt to scare me to death? Why, I know this people better than he does. I was raised just a little east of here. I am a part of this people. But the Judge was raised further north, and perhaps he has some horrid idea of what this people might be induced to do.”⁷² Lincoln’s confidence that he knew southerners better than Douglas led him to believe that Douglas had been deceived by an aggressive proslavery minority in the South. When Douglas declared that the entire South was “rallying to the support of the doctrine that if the people of a Territory want slavery they have a right to have it, and if they do not want it that no power on earth can force it upon them,” Lincoln ridiculed his confidence.⁷³ Douglas believed that if free states like Illinois could simply “settle the slavery question for herself, and mind her own business and let her neighbors alone, we will be at peace with Kentucky, and every other Southern State.” Yet Lincoln did not see popular sovereignty cloaking the Union in peace. Rather, he perceived the deep divisions within the Democratic Party, the escalating demands of the proslavery minority, and the cowering resignation of men on both sides of the sectional divide as evidence that the “pill of sectionalism” Douglas “has been thrusting down the throats of Republicans for years past” would soon be “crowded down his own throat.”⁷⁴ He believed James Buchanan had been “duped by [southern] men” who claimed their slaveholding interests were being threatened, and now Douglas and his denial of any conspiracy “only show[ed] that he was *used* by conspirators, and was not a *leader* of them.” Once the South had gained the concessions it wanted, these men would be cast aside.⁷⁵

⁷² *CW*, III: 463–64; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 152.

⁷³ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 298, 217, 292.

⁷⁴ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 218–19, 223.

⁷⁵ *CW*, II: 354; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 58–59.

Lincoln perceived the deception of the Little Giant as a feat accomplished by a small yet increasingly powerful group within the South. As his statements in favor of the nation's founding principles and its prohibition against slavery in the territories indicated, Lincoln continued to believe the vast majority of Americans held an aversion to slavery. The clause of the Declaration of Independence that stated "all men are created equal" he believed had been placed there by their ancestors because they "knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants" and sought to protect future generations against such men and their schemes.⁷⁶ In the 1850s those tyrants were the proslavery southern slaveholders who sought to extend the institution at the expense of the peace and prosperity of the Union. Lincoln continued to assume, however, that the people largely favored the extension of free soil. He expressed his confidence in the antislavery bent of the American people when he urged them to see the obvious benefits of excluding slavery from all territories. "[I]f slavery shall be kept out of the Territories during the territorial existence of any one given Territory," he explained, the people would always have the right to introduce slavery, if they wished, once the territory became a state. It seemed so unlikely to him, however, that the people, "when they come to adopt the Constitution, [would] do such an extraordinary thing as to adopt a slave Constitution, uninfluenced by the actual presence of that institution among them." Lincoln's imagined a scenario in which ten men entered Kansas, nine of them opposing slavery and one bringing with him ten slaves. Over time, he explained, the nine would sympathize with their slaveholding neighbor and would vote in favor of upholding the institution. Although thinking such laws would simply guarantee their single neighbor's rights, the nonslaveholders would instead find to their dismay that they invited hordes of additional slaveholders with their slaves. Lincoln's

⁷⁶ *CW*, II: 406.

example displayed his own keen understanding of the ways white southern non-slaveholders felt beholden to their slaveowning neighbors and relations, while exhibiting a simultaneously idealistic belief that most men felt a moral and/or social repugnance to slavery akin to his own.⁷⁷

Lincoln's perception of Douglas as an ambitious puppet of the South who mistakenly believed he understood the people of that section prompted him to see a great danger lurking behind Douglas's stand against the Lecompton Constitution. Douglas had rebuked this first constitution Kansas had sent to Congress because he believed the proslavery document did not represent the real interests of the settlers but had rather resulted from a corrupted, perverted form of the popular sovereignty he upheld as "the great principle." Although Douglas vehemently opposed the Lecompton Constitution in 1857, the Buchanan administration vowed to uphold it, setting Democratic factions at odds with one another. From 1857 to 1860, Douglas presented himself as an embattled Union-loving man whose stand against the injustice of the Lecompton crisis cost him the support of Republicans and Democrats alike. Many Republicans, finding themselves suddenly on the same side of this important issue as the Little Giant, began to consider an alliance with popular sovereignty Democrats. As Lyman Trumbull explained to Lincoln, Douglas's "course was so unexpected to many & was looked upon as such a God send that they could not refrain from giving him more credit than he deserves." Many of the Republicans, for one reason or another, were content to let Douglas lead the opposition

⁷⁷ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 77–78. Lincoln explained that the one slaveholder who entered a territory was "a good man in other respects...a good neighbor, and being a wealthy man, he is enabled to do the others many neighborly kindnesses." The nine men opposed to slavery "like the man, though they don't like the system by which he holds his fellow-men in bondage." However, after living together for years, the bonds between them strengthened through intermarriage and neighborly affection, and over time "the people learn to look upon slavery with complacency." *CW*, II: 362.

against the Lecompton Constitution. Trumbull assured Lincoln that despite the combined efforts of Republicans and Douglas Democrats against Kansas's admission to the Union under that Constitution, they "have no sort of idea of making Douglas our leader either here or in Ill[inois]." ⁷⁸

Lincoln perceived the entire Lecompton incident as the clearest evidence that an ambitious southern slave power was using Douglas and his doctrine as a tool to spread slavery further. Because Douglas continued to deny that such a conspiracy existed and relentlessly pressed forward with his vision of popular sovereignty as the permanent solution to the problem of American slavery, Lincoln urged Republicans not to fall in with Douglas. ⁷⁹ The Republicans believe "both the President and Douglas are wrong," he explained to Lyman Trumbull in November 1857, "and they should not espouse the cause of either, because they may consider the other a little the farther wrong of the two." The Lecompton struggle, he elaborated in an 1856 speech, "was made on a point—the right of a people to make their own constitution—upon which he and the Republicans have never differed." ⁸⁰

To Lincoln, the defection of Republicans or potential Republicans to Douglas was not merely political but personal, and it impacted his campaign against Douglas for the U.S. Senate seat in 1858. After writing to longtime Whig leader John J. Crittenden in the summer of that year, Lincoln received an apologetic reply from the Kentuckian that he could not pledge his support for Lincoln against Douglas. He and the Little Giant, he

⁷⁸ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 207–10; Lyman Trumbull to Lincoln, Jan. 3, 1858, LC.

⁷⁹ Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 113–14. Lincoln invoked Douglas's references to a "fatal blow" being struck against popular sovereignty by the Lecompton Constitution as further proof that there was indeed a conspiracy perpetuated by the slave power. Yet Lincoln became worried when he heard that Republicans were praising Douglas for his stand against the Lecompton Constitution. *CW*, II: 430.

⁸⁰ *CW*, II: 427–28; Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 17. Lincoln urged Jediah F. Alexander in May 1858 that despite their common opposition to the Lecompton Constitution, "there remains all the difference there ever was between Judge Douglas & the Republicans." *CW*, II: 446.

explained, had “acted together in opposing the enforcement of the Lecompton Constitution upon the people of Kansas,” and Crittenden had been deeply affected by Douglas’s stand, which was “full of sacrifice, & full of hazard, yet he took it, and he defended it, like a Man.” Crittenden believed the Buchanan administration posed a much greater threat to the Union than Douglas. He therefore considered Douglas’s re-election to the Senate “necessary as a rebuke to the Administration, and a vindication of the great cause of popular rights & public justice.” Crittenden promised not to go out of his way to help Douglas, admitting that he had “no disposition for officious intermeddling,” but lamented that he could not now pledge his support for Lincoln. Certainly, Lincoln did not lose to Douglas in 1858 simply because of Crittenden’s decision. Douglas’s tactic of presenting Lincoln’s platform as abolitionist, and his own doctrine as both antislavery and democratic, worked to convince a vast number of Illinoisans to return him to the Senate. However, his course displays the dangers Lincoln feared the Republican Party’s non-extensionist pledge could fall into if party members sought to align with Democrats.

The spotlight that had been thrown upon the debates launched Lincoln into national recognition. Democrats’ curiosity had been aroused by the man who dared to engage the Little Giant, while Republicans realized Lincoln’s ability to articulate the essence of Republicanism in contradistinction to popular sovereignty and proslavery.⁸¹ For the rest of the decade, Lincoln insisted that Republicans hold steady to their platform and refuse “the temptation to lower the Republican Standard in order to gather recruits.”⁸² Thinking forward to the presidential election of 1860, Lincoln continued to apprehend Douglas’s influence more than he feared the possibility of secession. Confident that

⁸¹ John J. Crittenden to Lincoln, July 29, 1858, David Davis to Lincoln, Nov. 7, 1858, Benjamin C. Lundy to Lincoln, Nov. 22, 1858, LC.

⁸² *CW*, III: 379.

secession would never gain a majority in the South but that the proslavery minority had gained enough political power to take control of the Democratic party, he predicted that Douglas's ambitions would be thwarted in 1860. The Democratic party is going "to let him into the convention, beat him then, and give him no plausible [sic] excuse to bolt the nomination," he foresaw. This scenario, however, did not make him fear the South's immediate actions. Instead, Lincoln expressed his worry that Douglas's rejection from the Democratic Party would result in "the Lecompton phase of politics reproduced on a larger scale. It will then be a question whether the Republican party of the Nation shall make him President, in magnanimous [sic] gratitude for having opposed a Slave code, just as it was, last year a question whether the Illinois Republicans should re-elect him Senator, in magnanimous [sic] gratitude for having opposed Lecompton." Lincoln thus warned that, even if Douglas found himself without the support of his party, he still remained the greatest threat in leading the Union "to the nationalizing and perpetuity of slavery." When Lincoln asserted that "the true magnitude of the slavery element in this nation is scarcely appreciated by any one," he was thinking not of a united South but rather of a nation lured into supporting popular sovereignty.⁸³ He explicitly stated this in a speech at Columbus, Ohio, which he delivered on September 16, 1859. "The chief danger to...the Republican party is not just now the revival of the African slave trade, or the passage of a Congressional slave code, or the declaring of a second Dred Scott decision," Lincoln warned. Instead, "the most imminent danger that now threatens [our] purpose is that insidious Douglas Popular Sovereignty. This is the miner and sapper. While it does not propose to revive the African slave trade, nor to pass a slave code, nor to make a second Dred Scott decision, it is preparing us for the onslaught and charge of

⁸³ *CW*, III: 398; II: 452.

these ultimate enemies when they shall be ready.” Lincoln’s speech at Cincinnati the next day, in which he claimed to address the Kentuckians in the crowd, likewise centered on Douglas. Throughout the speech Lincoln purposefully miscast Kentuckians as proslavery radicals who “believed Slavery is a good thing; that Slavery is right; that it ought to be extended and perpetuated in this Union.” Playfully assuring them that he would not attempt to convince them otherwise, he declared: “I only propose to try to show you that you ought to nominate for the Presidency, at Charleston, my distinguished friend Judge Douglas.” Far from believing that most Kentuckians were proslavery, Lincoln erected this proslavery straw man in order to show that Douglas’s popular sovereignty doctrine would bring about the same results as the most proslavery platform the South could devise.⁸⁴

Although Lincoln was careful to stand firm upon the Republican Party’s pledge against slavery’s extension, he remained equally committed to upholding the fugitive slave law, and all other constitutional provisions that appealed to Union-loving men in all sections of the country, even if many northern Republicans disagreed with him.⁸⁵ At the end of 1859, Lincoln still believed that the Republican Party, rightly understood, appealed to white nonslaveholders across the Union. He thought the hearts and minds of southerners and northwesterners naturally resisted Douglas’s representation of slave territory as equal to free territory, and that the results of “the old Ordinance of ‘87” clearly showed the benefits it had wrought to “happy, prosperous, teeming millions of free men.” Nevertheless, he understood the appeal of Douglas’s arguments, especially to those anti-slave system northwesterners whose friends and families remained in the

⁸⁴ *CW*, III: 404–05, 440–41.

⁸⁵ *CW*, III: 384, 386, 390.

South. Popular sovereignty allowed them to be equally opposed to slavery and abolitionism, to live on free soil, but to follow the wise maxim: “judge not lest ye shall be judged.” As 1860 approached, therefore, Lincoln continued his Republican crusade against the Little Giant. He soon learned how rightly he understood the South in some ways, and yet how wrongly he had calculated the likelihood of a real secession movement.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ *CW*, III: 448, 276.

Conclusion

Lincoln Views the Secession Crisis, 1860–1861

From Lincoln's nomination at the May 1860 Republican convention to his inauguration on March 4, 1861, his approach to the South and to the secession crisis followed a course that stemmed from his northwestern roots. Very early in his presidential campaign, he decided that the Republican Party must hold to its pledge against the extension of slavery at all costs—even if the South attempted to dissolve the Union. Yet as late as March 1861, when he spoke before a depleted Union, the southern-born northwesterner continued to believe in, as David Potter once termed it, “a peaceful ‘reconstruction’ of the Union.” Lincoln's southern connections had endowed him with a particular understanding of the white southern nonslaveholder as a committed Unionist. By 1860 he recognized that years of living in a society based on slavery had altered the politics of nonslaveholders who remained in the South. He suspected that many of them had indeed forsaken the truth of slavery's immorality, and now praised it as a great good. Yet Lincoln believed these praises to be the false product of slaveholders' demagoguery, and he therefore persisted in his faith that most southerners would ultimately resist and/or overthrow the secessionists.¹

¹ Historians of the U.S. South have long been divided over their views of southern society. As William J. Cooper and Thomas E. Terrill explain, two southerners offered quite contradictory visions of their own society in pre-Civil War works. Hinton Helper's *Impending Crisis* depicted the exploitation of white nonslaveholders by the slaveowning class, whereas Daniel Hundley's *Social Relations in Our Southern States* “found unity and harmony in southern society.” Although “most scholars believe that Helper's basic point is correct,” many southerners living in the 1850s appeared to vehemently disagree. Cooper and Terrill list five general reasons why social harmony seemed to exist between many white slaveholders and nonslaveholders. Cooper and Terrill, *The American South: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 276–78. John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 113, asserts in his study of western North Carolina that “the majority of Carolina highlanders, whether they themselves owned slaves or not, had some stake in the institution and thus, to varying degrees, accepted it.”

Lincoln's mistake sprang from his awareness that his northwestern experience had equipped him with a particular knowledge of the typical white southern nonslaveholder that many other northerners simply did not have. The confidence he derived from these connections led him to believe that he understood the South on the eve of war, when in fact the southerners with whom he was most acquainted through 1860 were largely anti-slave system migrants to the Northwest, antislavery activists, slaveholders, and kin. His conception of the South relied almost entirely upon the various insights that these individuals had imparted to him over the years, in the politically and socially diverse climate of central Illinois and in the halls of Congress. Since these individuals overwhelmingly displayed a strong commitment to the Union, he convinced himself that once his presidential administration had calmly and firmly displayed for the South its conservative intentions, droves of Union-loving southerners would return their individual states to the Union.² However, despite the recruitment of Union troops from certain pockets of the South, white nonslaveholding southerners overwhelmingly supported the Confederacy once the war began, choosing to defend their hearths and homes in a slave-based society rather than acting in what Lincoln believed to be their natural self-interest.³

² Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, 225. Most agree that Lincoln, in some way, miscalculated southern Unionist sentiment. Donald, *Lincoln*, 260; Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, xxiii, 225; Oates, *With Malice Toward None*, 188; Harold Holzer, *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860–1861* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 78; Harrison, *Lincoln of Kentucky*, 122; Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 252, 254; Richard N. Current, *Lincoln's Loyalists* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 5; Harris, *With Charity for All*, 8–9; Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 128. Richard Striner, *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10, asserts that Lincoln's course throughout the secession winter was part of a grander, secret plan to permanently rid the nation of slavery, while Douglas R. Egerton, *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 292, argues that he “took lower-South ultras at their word and suspected that nothing Congress might do could stem the tide of secession.”

³ Eric H. Walther, *The Fire-Eaters* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 4, portrays the wide variety of arguments that historians, themselves, have offered in attempting to solve “the riddle of secession.” Despite the prevalence of secessionist sentiment in the South, a significant number of southerners did ultimately fight for the Union. The nonslaveholders of western Virginia, for example,

The arguments Lincoln offered to the public from 1858 to 1860—that the Northwest Ordinance proved the Founders’ nearly unanimous commitment to eventually ending slavery, that the Republican Party posed no threat to the South, that the differences between North and South had been vastly exaggerated, and that popular sovereignty remained the most insidious of doctrines to the Union—indicates how little his views of the South changed. In his 1860 address before the Cooper Institute, he provided his most detailed history of the Northwest Ordinance yet, similar to the extended explanation Edward Coles had given in his 1855 speech. Although Lincoln held no unrealistic expectation that the Republican Party would win even a significant minority of the South in the upcoming election, he did assert that “we shall have votes in the South in the glorious year of 1860,” hoping this realization would allay southern fears that Republican doctrines were sectional and detrimental to the South. “We mean to leave you alone, and in no way to interfere with your institution,” he reassured southerners at Cincinnati, “to abide by all and every compromise of the constitution.... We mean to remember that you are as good as we; that there is no difference between us other than the difference of circumstances.”⁴ To correspondents, he explained that he would most

“objected...[so] furiously to slaveholders’ antiegalitarian dominion over whites” that they formed the Unionist state of West Virginia. Lincoln’s misunderstanding of the South therefore stemmed not from an entirely misplaced faith in southern Unionism, but an overextended one. Link, *Roots of Secession*, 254; William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Showdown in Virginia: The 1861 Convention and the Fate of the Union* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), xviii; Daniel W. Crofts, “The Southern Opposition and the Crisis of the Union,” in Gary W. Gallagher and Rachel A. Sheldon, eds., *A Political Nation* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 97–102; and Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln’s Loyalists: Union Soldiers from the Confederacy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

⁴ *CW*, III: 551, 453. Lincoln had previously contended, in his Cooper Institute address, that the Republican Party would receive southern votes in the election of 1860. *CW*, III: 536.

certainly support southern candidates for the presidency or other high offices, if they “place themselves on republican ground.”⁵

After hearing southern threats of secession during his own time in Congress and in the years thereafter, Lincoln remained unconvinced that a secession movement would actually attract a significant portion of nonslaveholding southerners. In his Cooper Institute address, Lincoln spoke to “the Southern people,” admonishing them for making the “condemnation of ‘Black Republicanism’” into “an indispensable prerequisite—license, so to speak—among you to be admitted or permitted to speak at all.” While he feared that southerners would continue to misunderstand the Republican Party, he did not fathom that after his denunciation of abolitionism and John Brown, and after pledging total support of all constitutional laws, a majority of southerners would gather behind a powerful secessionist movement. Lincoln therefore retained his focus on defeating Stephen Douglas and popular sovereignty, not only until his election as president but also as president-elect. He reiterated that popular sovereignty was “the surest way of nationalizing the institution” of slavery. “Just as certain,” he said, “but more dangerous because more insidious; but is leading us there just as certainly and as surely as Jeff. Davis himself would have us go.”⁶

He also incorporated a new argument against popular sovereignty, which indicated his acute awareness of the relationship between migration and slavery politics. Urging Douglas Democrats to “consider the effects” of their doctrine, he explained: “We

⁵ *CW*, III: 380. Although historians note Lincoln’s explanation of the Northwest Ordinance at the Cooper Institute, they do not search for the roots of his arguments in his northwestern experience. Gary Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback: How Abraham Lincoln Beat the Odds to Win the 1860 Republican Nomination* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), 139–42; Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 264; John C. Waugh, *One Man Great Enough: Abraham Lincoln’s Road to the Civil War* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2007), 297, 302.

⁶ *CW*, III: 536.

in the States are not to care whether Freedom or Slavery gets the better, but the people in the Territories may care.” This appeared perfectly logical, of course. “But are not the people of the Territories detailed from the States? If this feeling of indifference—this absence of moral sense about the question—prevails in the States, will it not be carried into the Territories?” Drawing upon his intimate knowledge that migrants carried with them beliefs that they did not simply discard when they reached their new destination, Lincoln recalled his northwestern experiences in denunciation of Douglas’s doctrine.⁷ Throughout the Spring and Summer of 1860, Lincoln remained fixated on Douglas, constantly gauging his probable strength until in August he concluded that “the success of the Republican ticket is inevitable.” Perceiving the split of the Democratic Convention in South Carolina and the emergence of two separate candidates, Stephen Douglas and John C. Breckinridge, as an event wholly beneficial to the Republican Party, and thus to the Union, Lincoln confidently remarked that the Democracy’s “chance appears indeed very slim.” Even after his election in November 1860 and the secession of several slave states from the Union, Lincoln remained nearly as concerned about the allure of popular sovereignty as about the possibility of a permanent dissolution of the Union.⁸

After his nomination on May 19, Lincoln chose not to address the public on the slavery issue until his inauguration on March 4. Nominees generally did not give speeches on their own behalf, but the Republican Party leader also believed that refraining from delivering or publishing speeches or other communications, both before

⁷ *CW*, IV: 5, 20.

⁸ *CW*, IV: 45–46, 82, 90. As Lincoln explained to George D. Prentice in late October, there were men both North and South who were “eager for something new upon which to base new misrepresentations.” *CW*, IV: 134–35. During his Cooper Institute address, Lincoln admonished that a man “has no right to mislead others, who have less access to history, and less leisure to study it, into the false belief that ‘our fathers, who framed the Government under which we live,’ were of the same opinion—thus substituting falsehood and deception for truthful evidence and fair argument.” *CW*, III: 536.

and during the secession crisis, was the best way to respond to threats and fears regarding slavery and disunion. For the past few years, the Illinoisan had delivered speech after speech, and witnessed Democratic and southern newspapers either ignore or mischaracterize his addresses to the detriment of the Republican Party in that region. Visibly frustrated at his inability to speak without his statements being turned against him, Lincoln wrote to fellow Sangamon County residents in February 1860 that while “Douglas attacked me...saying it was a declaration of war between the slave and the free states,” he had “said no such thing.” In response to these farmers’ request that Lincoln explain to them his statement that the Union “could not stand half slave and half free,” Lincoln exasperatedly pointed out that they “misquote, to some material extent, what I did say; which induces me to think you have not, very carefully read the speech in which the expressions occur.” Rather than grant them a new explanation, Lincoln simply reprinted his actual statement, recognizing that the newspapers these men had read either misquoted him or provided misleading extracts of his speeches.⁹

Lincoln therefore firmly committed himself to simply remaining silent, as several friends had suggested. His sense that his statements would not reach the South uncorrupted stemmed from his conception of slave states as areas wherein the slaveholding power consolidated its control over resources, power, politics, the presses, and the lower classes over time, until men like Benjamin Hedrick or Hinton Helper, and all those who disagreed with proslavery, were by intimidation and threats forced to keep silent. From Lincoln’s northwestern point of view, the white outcasts of southern society, as well as those who morally opposed slavery, either fled from this oppressive system to free soil or kept their silence. Meanwhile, the slaveholding power consolidated its hold

⁹ *CW*, III: 519–20.

over southern society, filtering the Republican Party's messages to the public and rendering southern Unionists impotent.

That these thoughts remained on Lincoln's mind as he faced the possibility of southern secession in 1860 and 1861 is evident. In short, with proslavery editors and slaveholders in control of the southern presses, he believed the true Republican message stood little chance of arriving unfiltered to the eyes and ears of the white southern masses. His words would only be used against him to convince an undereducated majority that the Republican Party meant to destroy the South.¹⁰ Therefore, when correspondents from across the U.S. wrote Lincoln in Fall 1860 requesting that he deliver some address to reassure the South, he firmly responded to them that, "in my judgment, it would do no good. I have already done this many—many, times; and it is in print, and open to all who will read. Those who will not read, or heed, what I have already publicly said, would not read, or heed, a repetition of it."¹¹

He also harbored an especial anger toward newspaper editors that revealed itself in his November letter to Nathaniel P. Paschall. Editor Paschall had suggested to one of Lincoln's friends that he assuage the fears of the country through a public statement. After restating his opinion that he "could say nothing which I have not already said," Lincoln allowed his resentment against newspaper editors like Paschall to boil over. "Please pardon me for suggesting that if the papers, like yours, which heretofore have persistently garbled, and misrepresented what I have said, will now fully and fairly place it before their readers, there can be no further misunderstanding." Fearing the dire repercussions that resulted from this partisan practice, Lincoln suggested that "the true

¹⁰ *CW*, IV: 93, 91.

¹¹ *CW*, IV: 130. Lincoln repeated this sentiment to L. Montgomery Bond, IV: 128, to George T. M. Davis, IV: 132–33, to George D. Prentice, IV: 134–35, and to Truman Smith, IV: 138.

cure for any real uneasiness in the country” rested with editors like Paschall, rather than with the country’s president-elect.¹²

Lincoln only had his suspicions confirmed when, after giving Lyman Trumbull a set of points around which to pivot his November speech at Springfield, newspapers gave very partisan assessments of the address. Lincoln angrily remarked to Henry J. Raymond: “Has a single newspaper, heretofore against us, urged that speech [upon its readers] with a purpose to quiet public anxiety?” None, in Lincoln’s opinion, had sought to reassure a worried public in a troubled time. “On the contrary the Boston Courier, and its class, hold me responsible for the speech, and endeavor to inflame the North with the belief that it foreshadows an abandonment of Republican ground by the incoming administration; while the Washington Constitution, and its class hold the same speech up to the South as an open declaration of war against them.” Lincoln concluded that this was “just as I expected, and just what would happen with any declaration I could make. These political fiends are not half sick enough yet.” Lincoln perceived this rabid partisanship by both northerners and southerners as further proof that his silence was best.¹³

Lincoln did grant private clarifications of his position on slavery and the federal government’s powers to individual southerners, and he also helped manage fellow Republicans and their addresses to a certain extent.¹⁴ Significantly, he tactfully requested Cassius M. Clay, a southerner who had gained popularity in the North for his staunch antislavery position, to speak on the Republican Party’s behalf in the southernmost

¹² *CW*, IV: 139–40.

¹³ *CW*, IV: 141–42, 146.

¹⁴ As Lincoln explained to John A. Gilmer, “I am greatly disinclined to write a letter on the subject embraced in yours; and I would not do so, even privately as I do, were it not that I fear you might misconstrue my silence.” *CW*, IV: 151–53.

regions of the free states.¹⁵ Lincoln's correspondence with Clay reveals the extent to which his own family's migration remained on his mind throughout 1860 and 1861. "In passing, let me say," Lincoln wrote, "that at Rockport you will be in the country within which I was brought up from my eighth year—having left Kentucky at that point of my life."¹⁶ His upbringing and his family's migration had not been forgotten. When he first composed a short autobiography for Jesse W. Fell in December 1859, Lincoln described his parents' movement from Virginia to Kentucky, emphasizing their poverty and lack of education as well as his own. Though "raised to farm work," Lincoln described how he independently moved to New Salem in 1831, working as a store clerk before rising in free society, serving in state politics and practicing law.¹⁷ This family migration and history clearly continued to influence Lincoln's perception of southern society. Explaining "[o]ne of the reasons why I am opposed to Slavery" in a speech he gave in March 1860, he argued that in a slavery-based society the path from poverty and indigence was barred against those who wished to improve their condition, whereas the free states offered more to both white and black men. "When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition," he asserted. "I am not ashamed to confess that twenty five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat—just what might happen to any poor man's son!" His position then as leader of the Republican Party demonstrated the vast opportunity that abounded on free soil. This conviction came out in another speech he gave at the Illinois

¹⁵ Knowing that the Republican Party would gain little support from the entire region in the upcoming election, he must have considered it best not to address the region directly. His letter to Clay in July 1860, expressing his thanks for speaking in Indiana, asked for further assistance "along our Wabash and Ohio river border." *CW*, IV: 54, 94–95; III: 553.

¹⁶ *CW*, IV: 85.

¹⁷ *CW*, III: 511.

Republican State Convention on May 9, when he spoke of his own migration to and settlement in the state, after his cousin John Hanks arrived at the convention hall with “two rails...bearing the following inscription: ‘ABRAHAM LINCOLN. The Rail Candidate FOR PRESIDENT IN 1860.’”¹⁸

When Lincoln composed another, much longer, autobiography in June following his presidential nomination, he drew directly upon the correspondence he had engaged in with relatives since his 1847-1849 term in Congress.¹⁹ In much fuller detail than ever before, Lincoln traced his extended family’s migration from Pennsylvania to Virginia, then from Virginia westward to Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and Illinois, before explaining that his father, Thomas, had chosen to remove to Indiana in 1816 “partly on account of slavery; but chiefly on account of the difficulty of land titles in K[entuck]y.” After describing his upbringing in Indiana as one filled with hard labor and little schooling, Lincoln explained that he learned most of what he knew by independently reading and studying any books available to him.²⁰ As parts of the Northwest intimately connected to the South by migration and trade, central Illinois and southern Indiana had offered Lincoln the opportunity to earn money taking supplies down to New Orleans, Louisiana. Upon moving to New Salem, Illinois, in July 1831, Lincoln became a store clerk, served briefly as captain of a volunteer company in the Black Hawk War, then became postmaster of New Salem and a surveyor of Sangamon county before he served in the state legislature in 1835. In explanation of his antislavery stance, Lincoln pointed out “so far as it goes,” his position on slavery “was then the same that it is now.” He had

¹⁸ *CW*, IV: 24–25, 48.

¹⁹ As Abraham Lincoln indicated to a likely relative in April 1860, some of this family history had been acquired through David Lincoln, who had detailed their family’s migration from Pennsylvania to Virginia. *CW*, IV: 37.

²⁰ *CW*, IV: 60–62.

only re-entered politics and become a Republican Party leader “when the repeal of the Missouri compromise aroused him as he had never been before.”²¹

The information Lincoln chose to include in his biography offers significant indication that Lincoln believed he should portray his southern origins, family migration, and consistent stance on slavery for the American people, and particularly for the South, in 1860.²² By spending pages explaining his family’s migration and his own progress in the free Northwest, Lincoln detailed a story of migration and interregional association that he believed would resonate among many Americans. As his letter written in June 1860 to Samuel Galloway proves, Lincoln clearly considered the composition of an autobiography a very important task. When a publishing company released its own biography claiming that it had received Abraham Lincoln’s endorsement, he countered that “I made myself tiresome, if not hoarse, with repeating to Mr. Howard, their only agent seen by me, my protest that I *authorized nothing*—would be *responsible for nothing*. How they could so misunderstand me, passes comprehension.” He “would authorize no biography, without *time*, and *oportunity* [sic] to carefully examine and consider every word of it.” Although there “may be nothing wrong in their proposed book,” he refused to even glance at the proof sheets, “determined to maintain the position of truly saying I never saw the proof sheets, or any part of their work, before its publication.”²³

After his nomination as the Republican candidate for president, Lincoln’s youth and southern connections comprised the subject of several letters. He warmly thanked

²¹ *CW*, IV: 63, 67.

²² Scripps largely retained Lincoln’s basic sketch, and “fashioned a thirty-two-page pamphlet biography. Jointly published by the *Press and Tribune* and the *New York Tribune*, it sold more than one million copies.” Oates, *With Malice Toward None*, 181.

²³ *CW*, IV: 79–80.

Caleb B. Smith and the rest of Indiana, where he had spent much of his youth, for supporting him in the national convention. In August 1860 he also wrote to cousin John Hanks his recollection of relatives in Kentucky and Indiana.²⁴ When another likely relative, John Chrisman, contacted him about their mutual family history, Lincoln again replied with the general information he had gleaned about their common ancestors. This correspondence to friends and relatives that resurrected Lincoln's past and family history occurred during a momentous period in Lincoln's life and in the country's history, just prior to the election of 1860. In a letter to Nathaniel Grigsby, whose family had moved with Lincoln and his family westward from Indiana, the presidential nominee described the changes that had occurred since that move nearly thirty years before. Though he remained confident that North and South were not as different as they perceived one another to be, Lincoln warned Grigsby, then a resident of Missouri, "that you can vote for me," but only "if your neighbors will let you. I would advise you not to get into any trouble about it."²⁵

With these relatives, acquaintances, and family friends, Lincoln clearly felt a personal connection; and at a time when he communicated with only a select few individuals, he seemed particularly responsive to these southerners, granting them explanations that he would not give to others. Therefore, when Kentuckian Samuel Haycraft contacted him explaining that he had known his father, Thomas, Lincoln described own vague recollections of Kentucky. Telling Haycraft that "I do not think I ever saw you" but certainly "know who you are," Lincoln assured him that he was "really

²⁴ *CW*, IV: 55, 100–01.

²⁵ *CW*, IV: 116.

very glad of your letter, and shall be pleased to receive another at any time.”²⁶ When Haycraft suggested in the summer of 1860 that Lincoln should return to his birthplace in Kentucky and deliver a speech there, Lincoln remarked: “You suggest that a visit to the place of my nativity might be pleasant to me. Indeed it would. But would it be safe? Would not the people Lynch me?” At the time, Lincoln apparently thought nothing of his comment. Yet when this statement leaked out to the broader public, he hurriedly wrote Haycraft again, assuring him that “I believe no such thing of you, or of Kentuckians generally.” This mishap reveals Lincoln’s uniquely northwestern understanding of the secession crisis. Familiar with the Lovejoy incident, Lincoln knew the ugly fate that a public antislavery figure like himself might encounter at the hands of a mob. His concern did not emanate from a fear that most southerners were disunionist; rather, he blamed the slaveholding power and its ability to inflame the passions of otherwise calm Unionists. The very faith that Lincoln placed in Haycraft and in the other southerners with whom he corresponded proves that he did not actually believe a majority of Kentuckians, or of southerners generally, would join the secessionist movement if they were given adequate time to reflect. In making such a remark to Haycraft, a southerner whom he barely knew, Lincoln displayed a disconcertingly naïve faith in his own southern connections and in the South’s Unionism. If he gave no further rhetorical fodder for secessionist editors to distort into unrecognizable contortions of Republican doctrine, then southern nonslaveholders would slowly realize that their best interests were not served by the secessionists and the slaveholders.²⁷

²⁶ *CW*, IV: 56.

²⁷ *CW*, IV: 69–70, 99. Kenneth J. Winkle asserts that Lincoln considered himself “the representative man of the nation,” and felt that he could relate to northerners and southerners, westerners and easterners. Winkle, *The Young Eagle*, 315.

The repercussions of Lincoln's misstep likely played a crucial role in his decision to retain complete silence throughout the election and into the winter of 1861. Lincoln later stumbled upon correspondence in the New York *Herald* that claimed Lincoln had "on one occasion been invited to go into Kentucky and revisit some of the scenes with whose history his father in his life-time had been identified," but declined after "asking by letter whether Judge Lynch would be present." Fearing the fallout of these remarks and their effects on the southern states, Lincoln wrote to George C. Fogg, explaining the situation and requesting that he provide a correction to the editor of the *Herald*. "I dislike, exceedingly, for Kentuckians to understand that I am charging them with a purpose to inveigle me, and do violence to me," he informed Fogg. After the correction was made, Lincoln wrote several letters to Samuel Haycraft, stating that "I was not guilty of stating, or insinuating, a suspicion of any intended violence, deception, or other wrong, against me, by you, or any other Kentuckian."²⁸ His correspondence with Samuel Haycraft continued long past this incident, revealing Lincoln's relentless belief that the majority of southerners would never take revolutionary action against the free states. After the election of 1860, Lincoln confided to him "that the good people of the South who will put themselves in the same temper and mood toward me which you do, will find no cause to complain of me."²⁹

When southern states began to secede after his election to the presidency in 1860, Lincoln did not alter his course, and his refusal to compromise the Republican Party's pledge regarding slavery demonstrates that his commitment to halting the progress of

²⁸ *CW*, IV: 96–97, 99.

²⁹ *CW*, IV: 138.

proslavery equaled his commitment to the Union.³⁰ Numerous times from his nomination to his inauguration, Lincoln denied requests that he yield or compromise his single principle that slavery must not be extended.³¹ His decision to pursue this unyielding course, however, was as much a response to the continuing threat of popular sovereignty, as it was to the South. He advised Lyman Trumbull in December 1860 that the “dangerous ground—that into which some of our friends have a hankering to run—is Pop. Sov. Have none of it. Stand firm.”³² In an imaginary scenario Lincoln jotted down in September 1860 entitled “Dialogue between Stephen A. Douglas and John C. Breckinridge,” he mockingly portrayed Breckenridge asking Douglas: “why did you never denounce us as disunionists, till since our refusal to support you for the Presidency? Why have you never warned the North against our disunion schemes, till since the Charleston and Baltimore sessions of the National convention?” In response, Douglas replied: “The condition of my throat will not permit me to carry this conversation any further.”³³ Knowing that John C. Breckinridge supported the Union, Lincoln remained convinced that Douglas posed the greater threat to the Union in 1860. Lincoln did not take the idea of secession seriously until it was upon him.³⁴

³⁰ Historians differ on how representative Lincoln’s anti-compromise stance was within the Republican Party at the time. David Donald and Eric Foner assert that Lincoln “was out of step with the members of his party in Congress” who desired compromise, whereas David Potter, though presenting the secession crisis as a time of great flux for the Republican Party, argues that Lincoln’s stance was largely in line with the majority of Republicans in 1860 and 1861. David Donald, *Lincoln*, 269; Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 155; Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, 13, 185.

³¹ *CW*, III: 388; IV: 149–51, 153, 156–57, 172, 175–76, 183.

³² *CW*, IV: 149–50. He reiterated this to William Kellogg, *CW*, IV: 150, and on Dec. 18 wrote to John D. Defrees that “I am sorry any republican inclines to dally with Pop. Sov. Of any sort. It acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty, and surrenders all we have contended for.” *CW*, IV: 155.

³³ *CW*, IV: 124.

³⁴ Though “the candidate of the avowed secessionists,” Breckinridge was “himself no secessionist at all.” William C. Davis, *The Union that Shaped the Confederacy: Robert Toombs and Alexander H. Stephens* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 2. Lincoln was certainly familiar with Breckinridge’s position, and had likely read speeches such as the one listed in Charles Lanman’s *Dictionary of the United*

If Lincoln had believed that most of the slaveholding South would secede from the Union, it is not certain that he would have altered his course very much, if at all. Nevertheless, his confidence in the latent Unionism of the southern people certainly made easier his decision to make no compromises on the extension of slavery. As he explained to John B. Fry in August 1860, the Unionist sentiment evoked by Virginian John M. Botts “contains one of the many assurances I receive from the South that in no probable event will there be any very formidable effort to break up the Union.” He explained to Fry that the “people of the South have too much of good sense, and good temper, to attempt to the ruin of the government, rather than see it administered as it was administered by the men who made it. At least, so I hope and believe.”³⁵ During the winter months of 1860 and 1861, as Lincoln considered the cabinet appointments he must make, he held onto hopes that a prominent non-Republican southerner would accept a post. After asking John D. Defrees about the likelihood of either Winfield Scott or Alexander Stephens accepting a cabinet position, Lincoln briefly corresponded with Stephens in an attempt to gain a greater sense of the South’s commitment to the Union, asking him whether “the people of the South really entertain fears that a Republican administration would, directly, or indirectly, interfere with their slaves, or with them, about their slaves?” In response, Stephens explained to Lincoln that the people of the South did not fear the Republicans “would attempt to interfere *directly* and *immediately* with Slavery in the States,” but that over time, the Republican doctrine would force greater concessions from them until eventually, the South was forced to give up its

States, in which invoked the most prominent politicians of America’s history in praise of the United States’s system of government. *CW*, IV: 74.

³⁵ *CW*, IV: 95. Lincoln did not realize that Botts “had become so isolated that his influence extended no further than Richmond working-class neighborhoods.” Link, *Roots of Secession*, 225.

institution. Although Stephens firmly insisted that the South must uphold its own right to continue to hold slaves, he also implored Lincoln to “understand me as being not a personal enemy, but as one who would have you to do what you can to save our common country.”³⁶ Although Stephens clearly would not accept a cabinet position in the antislavery Republican Party, Lincoln pressed onward in his search of other possible southern candidates, and ultimately settled upon Montgomery Blair and Edward Bates.³⁷

On his long pre-inaugural trip to Washington, D.C., in February 1861, Lincoln made many remarks in several towns and cities along the way but no substantial speeches on the slavery issue. Saving his explanations for the day of his inauguration as the sixteenth President of the United States, Lincoln carefully and methodically crafted an Inaugural Address that he believed would speak to the vast majority of individuals who still clung to the Union. His reassurances that the Republican Party pledged only to halt the expansion of slavery, never to interfere where it already existed in the states, and that as president he would respect the powers and privileges of the states, all reiterated the arguments he had made for years. The Republican Party would always uphold the Constitution, all national compromises, and provisions such as the fugitive slave law, which protected the South as well as the North. With seven states having seceded from the Union and the rest of the South considering its future course, Lincoln also took a resolute stand against the legality of secession, asserting “that no State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union.” He spoke specifically to those “who

³⁶ *CW*, IV: 155, 160; Alexander Hamilton Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States* (Philadelphia, Pa. and other cities: National Publishing Co., 1870), II: 267, 270.

³⁷ Lincoln attempted to persuade John A. Gilmer into the cabinet, but Gilmer, a proslavery North Carolinian, declined after serious consideration. *CW*, IV: 164, 171–72; Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, 152–53. Several historians detail Lincoln’s failed attempts to acquire additional southerners for his cabinet. David Donald, *Lincoln*, 263; Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 139; White, *A. Lincoln*, 358.

really love the Union,” asking them: “Will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake,” by seceding from the Union and rising up against it? Evoking his understanding of how intertwined the people and institutions of the two sections truly were, Lincoln reminded the American people that “[P]hysically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them....[t]hey cannot but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them.” Placing his faith in the people, he assured them: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

These “bonds of affection,” which Lincoln was confident still existed between the people of different sections, surely would not dissipate and allow the nation to plunge into war. Too many lives were bound up in personal connections on both sides of the Union. Echoing the sentiment he had voiced in his Lyceum speech of 1837, Lincoln urged Americans to put aside angry passions and give in to “the better angels of our nature.” Worried by the extent to which disunion had already spread, Lincoln continued to believe in March 1861 that most of the white South—including those states that had already seceded—would return to the Union upon seeing the error of their ways. His family past, his intimate understanding of the migratory connections that bound up northwesterner and southerner, and his firm conviction that slavery was both morally and socially wrong convinced him that Unionism would still prevail over secession in the 1861 South. His ignorance of the attachment of white nonslaveholding southerners to

their region and to the institution of slavery reveals his peculiarly northwestern conception of the South on the eve of civil war.³⁸

³⁸ *CW*, IV: 263–67, 270. Furthermore, as James G. Randall points out, “[i]t is striking, almost startling, to take the Southern or Southward-looking area that remained within the wartime Union and note its immense proportions.” If Lincoln exhibited a grave misunderstanding of the average white nonslaveholding southerner, he displayed an equally keen understanding of the inhabitants of southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and of Kentucky, Missouri, West Virginia, and Maryland. James G. Randall, *Lincoln and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946), 52–53. Of course, a considerable contingent of southerners refused to support the Confederacy. For example, many Ozark mountaineers maintained Unionist ties with the North throughout the war. Jones County, Mississippi residents separated themselves from the rest of their state (whether through the formal formation of an independent free state, or by the simple organization of Unionists who fought their Confederate neighbors). Bynum, *The Free State of Jones*. These contingents prove how close some southwestern migrants remained ideologically similar to their counterparts in the Northwest, even during the Civil War. These Unionists, however, were overwhelmed by a much greater coalition of slaveholders, yeomen, and nonslaveholding whites who chose to embrace the Confederate cause in 1861. In James Woods’s estimation, “the perception and the reality of a new prosperity based upon a cotton economy,” shared in even by the nonslaveholding majority comprising 4/5 of the white population, “caused an overwhelming number of Arkansans to identify with a slaveholding Southern Confederacy.” Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment*, 170.

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